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ELIZABETH EDEN.

A Novel.

BY

M. C. BISHOP.

" Learn by a mortal yearning to ascend,
Seeking a higher object. Love was given,
Encouraged, sanction'd, chiefly for that end.
For this the passion to excess was driven,
That self might be annull'd, her bondage prove
The fetters of a dream opposed to Love."
WORDSWORTH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

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ELIZABETH EDEN.

CHAPTER I.

Every one had need to be agreeable and at their best, for Mrs. Harlay's smile had grown feebly false as she saw Mrs. Eden's return with Mr. Ravenscroft. A very real pang of vexation clutched her as a thought of Mademoiselle Gautier's extreme attraction, both of manner and form, flashed on her. "Where is Ernest?" she had asked hurriedly.

"We have had ever so many adventures. We might as well have been on the Quest of the Sangreal. There was a wounded child in the chestnut, and then there was a sick woman in a place called the Dell;

and Mademoiselle Gautier very kindly looked after both of them, quite in the proper style of *damosel errant*. Sir Ernest sent us on before to tell you we were not altogether lost."

"Wounded child! She strangely neglects her duties!" exclaimed Mrs. Harlay, who, after her conversation with the rector, was not sorry to possess a grievance for use, if occasion arose. "And a sick woman! Oh, heavens! not fever? Mrs. Eden, dearest Mrs. Eden, you did not risk yourself?"

Mrs. Harlay drew away from her friend.

"'Hey diddle diddle, to visit the sick,
Makes my old parent as cross as Old Nick,'"

hummed Olly irreverently in an undertone to Crumpets.

"I hope no one risked anything," replied Mrs. Eden, too light-hearted to accept the thought.

"Was it fever? I implore you to tell me!"

"I really am not sure, but we can establish a *lazaretto*. Look, I will draw a

cordon sanitaire right through the tea-tray. The gentlemen shall be told off to smoke in a circle round the suspected. Mr. Ravenscroft, no trifling, I beg. But here are the chief centres of contagion. Let me proclaim your isolation, Sir Ernest."

"Pray do not make a joke of it," said Mrs. Harlay. "I shall say nothing more now. How are we to arrange plans about returning? Mademoiselle must be fumigated. Yes, I am truly displeased, mademoiselle."

It was not easy to soothe the nerves and appease the agitations caused by Mademoiselle Gautier's unpopular charitableness. Nor was Sir Ernest in a conciliatory mood. But as a joke with a good deal of unpleasant meaning in it, Mrs. Eden's quarantine was carried out. Gipsy tea of an earthy flavour was distributed by the men with weak attempts at conciliation. A giggle from Olly ceased suddenly as if it had been attempted in a vacuum. Mademoiselle Gautier remained silent, nor would she see the fun of isolating the

cream-ewer and sugar-bowl after she had touched them.

There was no question of second cups, and it was found to be time to order the carriages for return.

Andrey was not allowed to return in Mrs. Eden's carriage, but squeezed in between the rector and Mrs. Harlay in their phaeton.

"I will ask you, mademoiselle, to come in by the kitchen-door when you return. I will take measures to disinfect your clothes at any rate," said the devoted mother.

"Would it not be as well," said Mrs. Eden hastily, "that mademoiselle should come to Edenhurst for a day or two?"

The proposal suited Mrs. Harlay, who, if she settled to dismiss her governess for sundry reasons quite independent of typhoid fever, could thus avoid any unhandsomeness in her way of doing it.

Elizabeth and Sir Ernest walked to the house together, but nothing was said of special meaning.

"Whatever happens, I can no longer leave the Dell as it is," said Sir Ernest; "and I fear there are other nests of fever about."

"It was fever, then?"

"I fear, no doubt of it. I am glad you are taking that girl home with you to-night. There is not much danger, I believe, and my aunt was unreasonable. She behaved—mademoiselle I mean—very kindly—bound up the child's leg, which bled a good deal, when the splinter was taken out—and she opened the chimney in the sick-room, which was stuffed with rags, and did several sensible things about the place. She is going to tell my old servant how to make some beef-tea."

"She was right, don't you think so?"

"Certainly. The immediate duty must be done, and then we have the promises for our own. I wish I could drive back with you. May I come to-morrow? I shall want to know how you are. This fever worries me."

He looked very anxious, even pale, but

Elizabeth was radiant with life and hope as she bade him good-bye.

"I have read in your papers," said Mademoiselle Gautier, after they had driven out of the inner court of Harlay Abbot, "that you were careful to 'stamp out' diseases; is it part of the work leaving the sick people alone to die?"

"Where it is for the public good, yes," said Mr. Ravenscroft.

"You are very advanced socialists, then, when there is no question of your purses, and got a long way beyond the teaching that crime is never allowable. Why do you blame assassins who shoot tyrants? You 'stamp out' a sick person because their disease is inconvenient to you."

"We are perfecting society, mademoiselle, and purifying it of infection."

"Very good, monsieur, but it is no longer according to Christian method—perhaps so much the better. But I did not expect a clergyman's wife, who sleeps strictly most part of Sunday, to be so enlightened."

Mrs. Eden was thinking of other things.

The heavy carriage moved too fast as it lumbered up the hill, leaving the vale steeped in slanting sunlight. But the horses' hoofs seemed shod with lead as they trotted up the drive at Edenhurst. She longed for the quiet of her room, where she could live again the little events of the day, and dream of yet happier moments for the morrow.

But first she saw mademoiselle to her room, and sent for her things; nor was Elizabeth's dreaming-time long, since she did not fail to appear at dinner. She felt cheerfully ready for all labours that might come to her hand, even small talk and peace-making. Mr. Ravenscroft was surly, but with pains she exorcised his surliness. Mademoiselle Gautier was silent and depressed. The way in which circumstances conspired with her was almost startling. Cool and brave as she was, she feared lest some signs of the conflict of feeling in her might be visible. Nor did she accept without scruple the kindness of Elizabeth. Yet the thought, "She is but sharing with me what is my own," came to strengthen

her; and again, "I will but use my chances; I will wage *bonne guerre* and be generous afterwards." These better impulses were, however, suddenly clouded when Mrs. Eden, turning to her, said,—

"Do you not admire Harlay Abbot? With a little re-arranging it will be the most perfect place in the county."

Her resolve to be rich at Elizabeth's cost had not so demoralized Alphonsine as the sight of Mrs. Eden's success with Sir Ernest. She had not recognized any special regard for him in herself, but Elizabeth's happy consciousness and secured tone vexed her, and roused a latent cruelty that seems to wait on women's jealousy of one another, however unfounded.

"Yes, I admire Harlay Abbot, and I should like to re-arrange it," she said slowly.

Mr. Ravenscroft looked at her in surprise, for he perceived a second meaning in her words; but Mrs. Eden was frankly pleased, and thought how useful mademoiselle would be in classifying the 'roba,'

now flung away in cupboards. Then she asked Alphonsine to sing and play, and Mr. Ravenscroft was appeased by the pathos of Mademoiselle Gautier's "Home, sweet Home," and perplexed, but also charmed by the Chopin into which she threw her troubled and reckless soul.

In the morning Mademoiselle Gautier reviewed her position, discarding dangerous illusions. Her tenure of office at the rectory hung by a thread. She had established no firm footing, she had secured no information worth the name. She was profoundly discouraged, and accused herself of romantic folly.

Mrs. Eden's liking for her was her best hope, yet she hated the thought of distinct treachery. It had never entered her head that there need be none, and that Elizabeth was capable of loyal recognition of a true claim, and even would assist her to discover proofs if they existed. So Alphonsine was perplexed; but when at eight o'clock a cup of tea was brought to her, there were two letters on the tray, which

crystallized, as by a touch, her suspended resolutions.

One was a stiff announcement from Mrs. Harlay that, after mademoiselle's conduct in inconsiderately exposing her pupils to infection, and her unbecoming reception of Mrs. Harlay's remonstrance, she must consider her engagement over. A cheque for three months' salary, and for the price of a second-class ticket to Geneva *viâ* Luxembourg, was included. A request was added, with all the emphasis of a P.S., that Mademoiselle Gautier would not return to the rectory. She would find her luggage at the "Eden Arms" in the village.

"Good," said Alphonsine, closing her jaws firmly, as she opened the second letter, which had arrived the evening before from Geneva. It was from her mother, and contained bad news. The last of her father's capital had been lost in a final effort to retrieve his later mistakes. Madame Chenévière wrote that he was sinking visibly under depression; that he would not go out, and his memory was gone; that

Alphonsine must recognize the fact that only M. Duval's interposition saved her father from utter disgrace and immediate penury, and that she must be prepared to receive him with gratitude when he came to England, as he meant to do, and bring her back to Geneva.

"Your mad meddling with our English resource is bearing its fruit. How long am I to obey your rash advice and stand off? I doubt not but that you have done nothing but expose us to the risk of losing all. If I do not get solid proofs that you are advancing, Duval will write to the London lawyers."

"So," muttered Alphonsine; "always that Duval, and she wants proofs. Even this day I may have to play my last cards. There are yet some trumps in my hand, and little mother will be sorry she was so harsh; and Duval—yes, Duval—shall regret it."

She was pale when she came down to breakfast, but her hair was arranged to perfection. Her eyes were pathetic, but

not the least red-edged. Her languid and appealing air just sufficed to excite interest, yet without risk of a scene.

"Madame," she said, "I fear it will not be in my power to help you with your *objets d'art*. Mrs. Harlay has dismissed me, and has even sent my clothes to the inn, lest I should cross her threshold."

"By George!" ejaculated Mr. Ravenscroft, so disgusted that he read straight through half a column of facetiæ in a local paper, and helped himself to all the fried bacon.

"May I see Mrs. Harlay's note?" asked Mrs. Eden very kindly and earnestly. Seeing that the dismissal was put on no other grounds than those of possible infection, she said,—

"I insist, mademoiselle, on your staying here for a few days. You must not begin a journey if there is risk of fever. Mrs. Harlay will be glad to know you are safe."

Alphonsine winced under the friendly looks and tones, but the thought of her father ill drowned all lesser regret.

She accepted Mrs. Eden's kindness, and

proposed beginning that day her task of looking over miniatures and curiosities, of which there were a good many in the various sitting-rooms. Some of the pictures she wished to examine closely, as she believed she could identify a Terburg unknown hitherto to the critical world.

For the first hour Mrs. Eden was interested in the work, and in the detection of private marks of which Mademoiselle Gautier seemed to have the science at her fingers' ends; but as the morning wore on, she felt tired, and, leaving Alphonsine free to visit all the cabinets and "glory holes" of the house, she went to her sitting-room, and, leaning back in an arm-chair, gave herself up to anticipation of Sir Ernest's coming.

On his love she surely reckoned, and that day he would certainly—he must speak of it. Yet a certain despondency crept through her hopes and happier thoughts. She believed his love so rich a treasure that she could not be worthy of it. She sincerely thought herself of a lower nature, incapable of a like faith, and unready for heroism of

any kind. Not herself of the visionary temperament, she reverenced it in him, and credited him with all her own conceptions of its high aims and motives. Then, suddenly thinking of herself, she went to a mirror let into the wall between the windows, and examined herself critically as she had never done before. She saw serious defects; she was too tall, too one-coloured in her paleness; her eyes were sunk, her cheek-bones too high; she was not nearly so freshly handsome as that Genevese girl. She went upstairs and changed her dress for one less youthful. The pink ribbons and muslin of the morning accented her age.

"I am looking ill," she thought; "but if he loves me, it doesn't matter," for she judged his tenderness by her own.

"This air is faint with too many flowers," she said, when she returned to her sitting-room; "I will go out under the pine-trees." She wanted to feel the large space of heaven above her, the free breeze from the "forest" on her hot face and hands. From thence she could see a bit of the road by which

Ernest would probably come. She was near the highest level of her life, though she believed herself to be but at the base of that mount of transfiguration in which all who love so fervently believe. But she was close to the supreme moment in which so complete is the present that there seem no past and no future, and so we have a fleeting glimmer of the timeless world.

It is not often given to man or woman to be conscious of that highest level of life, or they might shrink from the downhill future. And even at that the ideal haunts them to the discredit of the actual. When their life has culminated, how many say, "Is that all?" Does such trivial ebb and flow of the unfathomable sea of Being, represent the whole action of powers we had hoped and felt were God-like?

Elizabeth found abundant excuse for Ernest's tardiness, though it was not yet midday; but, just when she had calculated his arrival to be improbable for the next half-hour, he stood suddenly beside her. She was self-controlled by habit and pride,

but the blood rushing to her heart left her pale as she stood up in hasty welcome of her guest.

"I should have been here an hour ago to ask you how you were, and that good Samaritan of a governess, but I had orders to give about the Dell. Whether it is the last straw on the camel's back or not, I could not leave it any longer so. It was a regular fever nest."

"Kind deeds won't break the camel's back," said Mrs. Eden.

"Do you care to hear what I have done about it?"

"Yes, I do care," she said quietly.

"I have hired a house on the hill above, got the doctor's leave, and moved the whole family out of that cottage. It is to be disinfected and pulled down. Later on we will see about building some decent ones elsewhere."

Mrs. Eden remained silent, digesting the "we," which might mean nothing or everything, though in this sense no doubt a slip of the tongue.

"So you know why I was three hours instead of two riding over."

"It was good of you to come so soon. I don't think Mademoiselle Gautier is the worse for her charity—the worse, if you will forgive me, for Mrs. Harlay's want of charity. She has dismissed her this morning."

Sir Ernest pulled his moustaches and looked annoyed. "But you are very good to her," he said.

"I like her, and she did not sit down and bewail herself, but set to work over my curiosities at once. I respect energy, you know."

Neither spoke for a few minutes. Striking off daisy-heads with his switch absorbed Sir Ernest. Elizabeth arranged the trimmings of her dress with interest. Then she proposed that they should return to the house by the walk "which is a little round, but shady," she remarked. "They would so be in time for luncheon," for that meal was imminent; and, though the sky fell, social order and hospitality must be held sacred as far as might be under the circumstances.

Sir Ernest mechanically walked as Eliza-

beth had suggested, but he did not seem to have heard her speak.

It was very silent in the thickets through which they passed. Not a bird chirped, and only the sharp patter of a falling laurel-leaf now and then broke the monotony of their footsteps.

Yet the throbbing of her heart surged in Elizabeth's ears, and beat for a moment like surf upon her brain, for Sir Ernest drew her hand within his arm, and held it there with a firm, nervous grasp, and she knew now for sure that she was loved.

At such a moment the rapture of such knowledge, the keen ecstasy of certainly accepted love, is not measured by the love given, but by the capacity for its reception.

Whatever was Sir Ernest's excellence, according to his lights and character, his love was of a shallow sort. It was dwarfed by the religious fervour which sometimes amounted in him to be a passion excluding all other passions.

But in that moment Elizabeth never thought of measuring his love. Such as it

was, she possessed it. Silently she waited to hear the form of words in which Ernest should speak, asking her to be his wife, "yoked in all enterprise of noble ends," as she passionately hoped. He could not doubt the answer: had she not left her hand in his? She could not have mistaken him; she was quite sure—quite sure. But at last the divine words sounded in her ears,—

"Mrs. Eden—Elizabeth—you know how I love you. Will you forgive my presumption? Will you hear me plead my cause? Don't speak, I implore you, till I have excused myself. Yet my only excuse can be shortly made. Since Amalfi I have loved you: I would not acknowledge it. I knew the barrier of my worse than poverty."

"Stop! stop!" muttered Elizabeth; "that should be nothing between us."

"But it is—at least it has been. Elizabeth, a man's honour must be more to him than his love: and I have striven and prayed; but yesterday I knew that it was God's will that I should tell you. Yes," he went on, with trembling voice and an inward appealing

manner, as if he were addressing a second self, within a manner; which she had seen once or twice before; "I asked for an intimation of His will, and it was favourable."

Before the close of his declaration, Mrs. Eden had already felt a pang of disappointment. But she urged herself to venerate, with a still higher love, this piety in her lover.

"So," he went on half dreamily, "I speak to-day what I might else have hidden for ever. It rests with you to dismiss me as an adventurer—presumptuous, unfaithful to his duty of self-restraint and unselfish service."

"Ernest!"—and her voice trembled as she said his name—"I do not see these things as you do. I only know that you are very dear to me, and I don't know why you should have doubted me."

They had paused under a massive ilex, but Sir Ernest still looked down on the dark soil and waited, uncertain, till Elizabeth, faltering and also looking down, drew nearer to him.

And something in him that blotted out

thought, and left hope a laggard halting behind the present—something of which no words have yet rightly written—shook away his plans and purposes as if they had been the withs wherewith Samson was bound by the Philistines. He clasped Elizabeth with wild pressure to his heart, and covered her bent head with eager kisses, and was in a trance of which he knew neither the beginning nor the end.

And yet it was a shallow passion; and since Elizabeth believed it to be more, it would have been happier for her if, ten minutes sooner, the rector's step, crunching the gravel walk, had fallen on their ears. Ernest's fit of feverish passion had persuaded her that he and he only was her fitting mate in this world and the next.

The foolish woman judged him by herself.

The rector was too bookish to be an observant man, but as he was selfishly interested in Sir Ernest's courtship, he could not fail to see that it had greatly advanced since yesterday. Mrs. Eden, however, and

his nephew, too agitated to bear recognition of their agitation, assumed extreme reserve and ceremony in their manner, which in itself would have betrayed them.

Mr. Harlay was well pleased. He had been more severely pinched for money than he had allowed his wife to know. Now he hoped that "somehow or other" the money market would become easier to him, once Edenhurst was "in the family." "I have come up to ask after you all," he said, "but especially to offer my wife's regrets to Mademoiselle Gautier for not having been able to see her. I suppose she leaves to-night or to-morrow?"

The rector was a gentleman, and really vexed by his wife's fright and harshness. Mrs. Eden explained to him that Mademoiselle Gautier was to stay a few days longer under her roof. "If there were fever, it would not appear for perhaps a fortnight."

"But you yourself look illish, my dear Mrs. Eden. It's an English compliment, I know, to tell you so."

"I shall be glad to get out of the glare. Come and have some luncheon."

"I should like to say a word to the poor girl," said Mr. Harlay benignly.

The "poor girl" made him a nicely-graduated reverence—not quite the same as if she had still belonged to his household, yet in excellent taste. She was better dressed than she had allowed herself to be while in actual service. A stranger would have thought her of equal social position, and just then, in beauty, the superior of her hostess. Frenchwomen have marvellous facility for rising to their parts, and the Chénevières had been French a generation back.

Elizabeth was indeed looking of a dead paleness, and she walked with slight unsteadiness up the steps of her house; but she thought, "It is my great happiness," and fought off her discomfort.

"Have you come on any really good *faïence?*" she said cheerfully to Alphonsine.

"No, madame, but I have found an undoubted *plaque* of Luca della Robbia, and

a *cloisonné* enamel, of which I am hardly equal to judge."

"See, Mr. Harlay!" said Mrs. Eden, "I entertained an angel unawares, and here are heavenly treasures of her finding."

Luncheon was announced. Mr. Ravenscroft had left by an early train; so, as Mrs. Eden and the rector walked first, Sir Ernest and Alphonsine crossed the wide hall together. Several circumstances had ripened quickly their slight acquaintance. The ready courage she had shown, and which was evidently natural to her, her quick appreciation of his wishes, Mrs. Eden's praise of her, and her apparent wish to serve Mrs. Eden, were so many recommendations—hardly needed, indeed, by her madonna face and pleasant manner.

She guessed that "something" had altered the relations of Sir Ernest and Elizabeth. He was absent in manner, even when he hoped she was "all right really."

"I am all right, thank you, but I fear Mrs. Eden is not."

He looked hastily towards Mrs. Eden as she sat down. She smiled back a little shy smile, and he thought, after all, it was not strange if she were a little pale. Besides, Elizabeth was in wild spirits—a rare event in her life. She drank a tumbler of claret cup at a draught—another rare event. She ate nothing, but her tongue ran away with her into the wildest nonsense, wherewith she pelted the rector, and made Mademoiselle Gautier break into French, quite unable to keep pace in English.

Sir Ernest she hardly spoke to, feeling so one with him that it was needless. She had too complete confidence in his love to dream of humouring it. Her high spirits were forerunners, it is true, of illness, but also born of the new faith in herself begotten by faith in him, her inspirer and the guardian of her future. Her lonely past seemed mere mechanical life, unreal, and to be forgotten with indifference. She was weary of the dim shadows cast by her fastidious doubts and her habits of criticism. Hitherto her life had seemed

choked by these weeds of the day, and its light had been obscured by persons entangled in them. But now, as she believed—yet, when she tried to think definitely of Ernest, she could not. At Amalfi and at Stresa she had thought certain things of him; but now, as she sat and flung sparkling nonsense around her, Ernest had quite outgrown her thought, for he was her love.

Alphonsine had answered wittily enough to the first of Elizabeth's quips and cranks; then, glancing at Sir Ernest, who sat next her, she saw that inwardly he was not very well pleased, and she became silent too.

He had little sense of humour, and was uncomfortable under its flashes. He listened over-anxiously to Elizabeth, and perceived, more clearly than ever before, that she had a breadth of mind, and a culture which he had not. It was a moment when, for his peace of mind, it was very necessary that he should feel superior, and she was at every word disturbing his sense of conquest.

Alphonsine observed his growing moodiness, and perceived the large part vanity had in his character.

Mrs. Eden was indeed over-talkative. Her imagination—usually a well-trained Pegasus—seemed newly winged, and would not suffer its ordinary harness. Life seemed as safe as heaven, without possible pitfall or storm, and why should she check her happy madness?

At last, not having eaten anything, she led the way into her sitting-room. The rector said good-bye with an anxious look at his nephew's grave face. He repeated his good wishes for mademoiselle, but carefully fulfilled his wife's injunction, and did not go near enough for handshaking, which by no means distressed the young lady.

CHAPTER II.

"Mademoiselle Gautier, how good you would be if you would play and sing!" said Mrs. Eden. "I did not like the roses this morning, the perfume was too much; but I shall now if you will give us some Schubert. Music and perfume suit each other." Mrs. Eden sat down in sudden collapse and weariness on a sofa, resting her head on the cushions of it, while Alphonsine went into the next room, where was the piano, and began the wild accompaniment to the song of the Erl King. Sir Ernest took up a book or two, and slightly frowned at their titles, but at last he drew a chair near Elizabeth's head. She was very silent and quiet now, and he stroked her soft hair and the long languid

hand that hung listlessly by her side, but which he took and kissed, as he could not help doing. For again she seemed to him the one fact in his life—the light in which other lights grew blurred—the power that could shape his course; and even as he yielded to these overmastering impressions, he doubted and dreaded them as if in them were danger to his soul.

For he was weak, and passion could, he knew, if once admitted, ravage that garden which he had so carefully fenced and planted, and cleared of noxious things, and in which he dwelt apart from the unelected. So it happened that, while he recognized the right and duty of loving the woman by his side, he suffered reactions, when he dreaded to be lost in the eddies of feeling and the idolatry of passion.

He had not that balance of qualities and the large nature which is capable of the higher love that is germane to Divine virtue. The puritan side of his character condemned emotions spent on "the creature."

He had not strength to be weak. But not Sir Zachary, his puritan ancestor, could have withstood the influences of that afternoon hour.

The wailing dissonances of Schubert's ballad drew truer response from these lovers than would have been drawn by sweeter tunes. There is bitterness and smouldering wrath because of the shallow imperfection of all human response to the divine summons in lovers' hearts, as is indeed evident by their unreason and irritableness. But the charm of love is by no means in its sweetnesses, but in its aspirations, in its guesses at immeasurable happiness—tangible, yet not to be grasped by our slight powers—best grasped meantime by the largest nature, and not wrecking the larger nature as it will a lesser one.

So Elizabeth's affection was generous and calm, nor did she dread excess in it. She knew herself strong to live her life to its fullest rightful limits of joy or suffering without economy of love.

But that afternoon she was inconsistent, and unlike herself. After she had listened half an hour to the music, she said abruptly, "I'm sorry Mr. Ravenscroft is gone. I am going to make a new will. . If I write my wishes in plain English on a sheet of letter-paper, it will do, won't it?"

Sir Ernest exclaimed and protested, as is conventional, and in truth he was painfully startled from his dreams as he sat at her head and held her hand.

Elizabeth had learnt some of his secret; she quoted a word of Holy Writ which stopped him at once. Surely he could look death in the face, and "he must not be a coward for her," she said.

Nobody knows, until they have honestly tried, how hard it is to make every-day life fit with the formulas of faith, which we repeat like parrots, unless, indeed, we allow ourselves time to equivocate, and contrive ways of escape by ingenious assumptions.

The recognition of death as a fact tests severely our state of mind. Looked at

from a frankly naturalistic point of view, it is sufficiently startling; but, accepted honestly as the Christian professes to accept it and its consequences, a great many familiar fancies are cut off at a blow. We are left shivering, without our little comforts of "perhaps" and "who knows?"

But Sir Ernest, being honestly a Christian according to his light, had, as quickly as he could, to reconcile conventional politeness with his creed. He found himself forced to agree to her whim of facing death that golden summer afternoon.

Mrs. Eden went to her writing-table and thought a second. Then she looked up at Ernest, who stood by and said to him,—

"You remember the boat at Amalfi? Are you quite sure what you said is all true?"

"I know it is, and more, far more, to be yet revealed."

She looked straight into his eyes, and worshipped the light that came into them. Her look wrought in him a keener fervour, and he accepted the sense of momentary

rapture as a token that he was not disapproved by the Higher Power.

Elizabeth was not playing with the subject. She wrote a short will on half a page of letter-paper, and had her signature witnessed by two of her servants.

Still Mademoiselle Gautier played on softly, while she thought energetically and rather fiercely of her next day's work among the Edenhurst pigeon-holes which Mrs. Eden had left open to her ceramic curiosity.

"It is just a chance," she thought, "but a chance most singularly afforded to me. If I find no trace of Francis Eden, my grandfather," she muttered emphatically as she struck a chord sharply, "in his house, there are still old people to get at. Then my journey to Yorkshire—perhaps further north—further, yes, to the North Pole to escape M. Duval. And this poor lady's romance will most likely fall through if I am not very slow in my inquiries. Yet I like her. I will be good to her if I succeed. When she has lost the game, I

will be kind and generous. Yes, she shall lose the game, and that mystic with it. She holds him by a slight thread, and one she will not care to draw tightly."

"Mademoiselle!" interrupted Sir Ernest, hastily coming in from the other room, "please come quickly, Mrs. Eden is ill. I fear she will faint."

Without an ill-timed word of alarm, Mademoiselle Gautier at once took charge of Mrs. Eden, who was indeed ill. Her fitness to advise, and even direct, was shown by her quiet orders when Mrs. Eden's maid hurried fussily in.

After air, eau de Cologne, and a perfectly flat position had been tried, Elizabeth said cheerily she was better. "Look here," she went on; "I think I have been poisoned by the air of that house. I have never ceased to smell it. I want to say what I wish to be done if I get worse. Don't send for any of my own relations, they are nearly strangers. If mademoiselle will stay, I think she would be very kind; and, Sir Ernest—why should I hesitate?

—Ernest, promise me to keep away and run no risks."

He had knelt by her and held her hand in his. On some pretext Mademoiselle sent the maid away and went herself to open another window. Mrs. Eden thanked her with a look. It was a very valuable art that of guessing and fulfilling the wishes of others, which Alphonsine excelled in.

"Ernest," said Elizabeth, "put that will in an envelope and don't let it be lost. But I'm not thinking of dying, you know, only that cottage smell haunts me." She went on quickly, for there was a sob in his throat as he tried to argue down her fancy.

Meantime the local doctor had been sent for. Mrs. Eden seemed much better, and hardly inclined to obey orders.

As yet, indeed, there was no particular care to be taken, though a feeling of sickness drove her to her room. Having left her there lying down, Alphonsine went again to the sitting-room where she found Sir Ernest. He was leaning against the

mantelpiece in profound depression. He looked for direct manifestations of Divine approval in events, and he had not sufficient scope of vision to see the benefits of disappointment though in theory he professed to believe in them. And he had heard horrid details of the fever at the Dell that morning. He did not turn towards Mademoiselle Gautier. He felt unmanned and not equal to small courtesies. But coming close to him she touched his shoulder and said, "Mrs. Eden fancies, but without special cause, that it is fever. But no one could say yet, perhaps not for days, anyhow. It is some sort of poisoning, but I trust it is not a bad case. If she had sore throat it would be like diphtheria. We will take great care of her."

The tone of her voice was sympathetic yet quite hopeful. He turned and grasped her hand thankfully.

"You will let me know everything—every wish of hers. I shall stay in the village, at her service night and day."

"Has she really no near relation to send for if indeed it should be fever?"

"I know of none. My aunt seems so frightened, she would be no good."

"Ah, she will overcome her terror for Mrs. Eden's sake I think."

"I will let Ravenscroft know if she seems more ill."

Mademoiselle Gautier was leaving the room when she paused by the writing-table. Eyes not trained in honourable habits are almost uncontrollably inquisitive; she had in a second read the one sentence—

"I leave all I have to Sir Ernest Harlay, of Harlay Abbot, by this my last will and testament."

She quietly doubled the page in two so as to hide the words, and said—

"Did she not ask you to take care of this paper which is here?"

Sir Ernest came quickly to the table. He found the sheet folded in two. He doubled it again, put it in an envelope and sealed it, in complete ignorance of its contents.

But for Alphonsine they were a fresh complication. As a piece in her game Sir Ernest acquired suddenly a very different value. Suppose it were fever or diphtheria and the fever fatal—suppose—it was right to face every contingency and most of all defeat—her hopes of establishing her mother's legitimacy futile, why then Sir Ernest was a possible means by which obliquely she might gain her ends.

"The telegraph was expensive, but I did right to stop all imprudences at Geneva." So thinking she returned to very assiduous and even kindly watch in the ante-room to Mrs. Eden's bedroom. Already, though she seemed scarcely ill, Elizabeth had the invalid instinct for trustworthy attendance which required from her none of those recognitions expected by dear friends and near relations.

Meantime all was social and bright at the rectory. The girls were dressed in those curious English costumes which are all very well as long as they are not worn out of England. Mr. Harlay had told his wife

that Ernest was conquering and to conquer at Edenhurst, that Mademoiselle had not lamented her destiny as shrilly as he had anticipated, and that she was apparently enjoying the best health.

"Of course, Christopher, you think my precautions silly," said Mrs. Harlay gaily, for there was as usual a flutter of visitors in the rectory. "Men are so reckless. No one is more thankful than I am that she escaped—if indeed she has. But I maintain I was justified, now wasn't I?" She appealed to a curate and Crumpets. Meanly influenced by a succulent luncheon, they could do no less than agree with their hostess.

"Besides," she continued with bland gravity, "her independence and carelessness yesterday shook my confidence. Mrs. Eden's kindness turned her head. She really assumed quite the airs of an equal."

"Sometimes even of a superior," said Alice, with a touch of irony.

"After all I did not know much of her," Mrs. Harlay went on, rather anxiously

justifying herself. "I'm sure I don't know whether the same weight attaches to the recommendation of a Genevese pasteur as to one of our clergy."

"Can't say, I'm sure," murmured Crumpets drowsily.

"At all events not more, and probably less than to the recommendation of any other Genevese," observed Mr. Temple, the curate, from a table where he was turning over a book of monograms with a view to church decorations.

"Eh, how do you make that out?" said the rector.

"Because," said Mr. Temple, who held everything Genevan somehow connected with a black gown, Calvin and bands, "shepherds that hold their office from wolves, and do as the wolves bid them, are not likely to be trustworthy. They must know they are in an untenable position."

"There you are again on your hobby of clerical supremacy. You won't see that there is no great difference between shepherds, wolves and sheep; after all, why

should you expect pasteurs to be supernatural beings?"

"Indeed I don't, but no men more assume to be than these unaccredited teachers, and therefore they are commonly more or less, humbugs."

"Well, well," said the rector, "if these Genevese pasteurs do their work, such as it is, I suppose they are in much the same position as other clergymen. They have certain compromises to make."

"They should make none."

"Pooh, pooh, my dear lad, continual compromise is a law of society, necessary to it, and to progress."

"So much the worse for progress."

"I say," interposed Olly, "if you want to preach wait till you have it your own way in the pulpit. Dad in the morning, lad in the afternoon. Both are safe to be right. I believe in the holy Anglican Breadth."

The rector objected to such flippancy, and with a vexed face went to his study.

Mrs. Harlay followed him.

"I suppose Ernest will come and see us presently," she said.

"I don't know: he's a queer fellow, I don't profess to follow his flights. The unreal trash one hears on every side," said the rector, still out of humour with his curate, "is disgusting. Ernest ought to have lived forty years ago, and been a Simeonite. He is rather the last Dodo now, a specimen of an extinct species. I declare his manner to-day was not a bit what it ought to have been. To a charming woman too, desperately in love with him."

"I hope I made no mistake about Mademoiselle. I had no idea she would have remained at Edenhurst."

"You made the mistake, my dear, of being inhospitable and uncharitable," said Mr. Harlay, taking a high tone.

"Ah! very likely," replied Mrs. Harlay, not at all impressed. "I trust she mayn't upset your plan, my dear. I thought her dangerous yesterday."

"I won't dispute your superior judgment,

my love, but to speak of business, let me tell you that unless there is a very decided change in our prospects, Olly must give up her horse, and you can only have old True Blue for your work. And there must be no more champagne for your drums, afternoon or evening."

"It's only Tisane, and poor Olly without her mount! You are very selfish, Christopher, you won't exert yourself. If you would only launch yourself I know you'd be run after. Nobody ever goes to sleep when you preach, and I'm sure that's a test."

"Launch myself into the ecclesiastical courts, I daresay."

"If you sneer at my opinion," said Mrs. Harlay with asperity, "of course I shan't offer it. But certain things befitting your station and your daughters, as your wife and their mother, I insist on. After all my efforts and sacrifices you are very cruel."

"Well, my dear, be as prudent as you can, and don't indulge in temper and

schemes and speculations as if you had money to make all right. Don't play your game, but *the* game if you don't want trouble, and it's not the game to treat a very clever and charming woman as you did Mademoiselle Gautier."

"Saul among the prophets," observed Mrs. Harlay derisively. "But whatever my anxiety I look for no help from you. I suppose you too are infatuated by that designing girl. I am certain she made an impression on Ernest by her theatrical ways yesterday. Men are such fools."

"Hush, hush! now leave me, my dear, I must get through some work."

"Pretty work! picking up Robertson and Stopford Brooke's cast-off ideas!" muttered Mrs. Harlay as a parting shot, even while she was composing her face and manner for a delightful re-entry into her world. She had heard wheels, and knew that there were visitors in the drawing-room.

She had done her husband an injustice.

He gleaned further afield, and distilled his weekly essays out of a wider range of material. Daily papers, political utterances, the literature of the coming religion of advanced thought and progress at any price yielded him "happy thoughts."

When dressed with literary skill, and weighted by a Biblical name or two, they made very stimulant sermons, which really were better suited to a proprietary chapel somewhere near Piccadilly than to a country congregation.

"I cannot feel that comfortable about hell as I used to be," complained old Dame Cripps to Master Waghorn of the "Pike," "since the rector bees so sure there is no such place. I seem shaken like about heaven. They always was mentioned together in my time."

But while giving quite a volatile and frisky account of the pic-nic at Harlay Abbot to her guests, who sat stiff with the particular stiffness of a morning visit in the country, a message reached Mrs. Harlay which upset her story and left her so con-

strained that her guests shortly took leave, and were hardly settled in their carriage before each of them had propounded a theory to account for Mrs. Harlay's unexampled confusion.

With a scared face she reappeared in the study, and found Sir Ernest there. He had brought the news of Mrs. Eden's fever symptoms, and the doctor's opinion too cautiously worded to inspire much comfort.

"I don't think I can be much use, but I am ready," said Mrs. Harlay, really making an effort to overcome her fears in the cause of society.

"I don't think," said her nephew, "Mrs. Eden could have a more useful person about her just now than Mademoiselle Gautier."

"Ernest, is that person established there? It becomes my duty to look after dear Mrs. Eden."

"Mrs. Eden is as yet the best judge," her nephew said, rather stiffly, "and she wishes for no one else."

"Only I implore of you, my dear boy, tell me one thing, are you specially interested? If so, count on me as a mother."

No one had more fluent use of social formulas than Mrs. Harlay, but Sir Ernest would not be pinned to any assertion. The derangement of his plans at Edenhurst discouraged him. Apart from that, not so much by his own instinct as by his consciousness of how Elizabeth felt, he shrank from fussy hopes and fears. Loyalty to her secret reinforced his silence, and besides no word of engagement had been spoken. He thought, with a curious tightness at his heart, that she was his to claim on her recovery. She was indeed his by a fulness of love that in reactionary moods he shrank from, as excessive and idolatrous.

"I suppose you will not go back to Harlay Abbot to-night," said his aunt, "you can have a bed here."

"I have ordered one at the Inn. Don't think about me or fuss yourself!"

But the occasion for social excitement was too good to neglect in a country district. There is a fashion about sewer poison which dates as far back as Prince Albert's death, when a loyal nation resolutely plunged into sanitary science. To find that an exalted person's drains are "in a shocking state" is thrilling, and that Lord Carabas is a victim to anonymous typhoid poison is a large instalment of "equality and fraternity," not to say "liberty" as well. To denounce it in a neighbour's premises gives complex satisfaction to several human feelings if one may judge of the eagerness to do so not found in other branches of public service.

Before dinner-time at the rectory, at least four families had been supplied with lively conversation for that meal; Mrs. Eden was not personally liked. Popular she was for excellent social reasons, but she occasionally puzzled people, and that is a hateful fault. Yet all the more was it a duty to commiserate according to the

best formula used on such occasions, and it comes easier to the English to be "so sorry" than to be "so glad."

Mrs. Harlay became at once the recognized fountain of information, and she knew how to enter agreeably into exciting details, suiting them to the capacity and taste of the inquiring squirearchs, who in mere respect to their order desired to know how the mistress of the model Edenhurst could have contracted typhoid poison.

Without any lapse of strictest truth it became an interesting circumstance in the case that the good rector's good wife had exposed herself far more to infection than had Mrs. Eden. It was generally believed that she had personally wrapped the offending labourer's wife in blankets, and taken the sick woman in her own carriage to the hospital.

"How kind and noble!" said a splendid friend, who was inclined to be irritable from excess of fat, but whose cross, round face, was belied by her measured words.

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"But I deserve the less credit," continued Mrs. Harlay, arranging with airy touches the lace on her apron, "that I am convinced the disease is not infectious."

"Then why in the name of Queen Dick," said Olly, who enjoyed flouting her mother's "fogies" and "hags," "did we hunt Mademoiselle out of the house."

"Isolda, my child, oblige me by seeing if your father is in the study."

Olly saw a very savage look light on her, and took the hint in great disgust.

"How sad!" put in the ponderous friend, with a sigh that caused her thick silks to creak. The remark had no special relevancy, but is always a safe one; "and I heard—I understood—that the day at Harlay Abbot was to have led to quite different results."

This was said with archness; but Mrs. Harlay was extremely cautious, and entered into so many explanations, that her guest was effectually confused.

"What a happiness to her friends that you are so near! I do trust you will

husband your strength, it is a long affair. She never had any relations staying there; I suppose there are none; so sad! but you are a tower of strength."

"I only wish I could do more," said Mrs. Harlay, with unction, as she returned the sympathetic pressure of her friend's fat hands.

"I am sorry for those poor people," observed the great squiress affably, as she drove home to a friend who had called at the rectory with her. "If Mrs. Eden dies, it will be a slip between cup and lip. They were bent on securing her for that crazy nephew."

"What hypocrisy!" observed Mrs. Harlay, with friendly warmth. "That woman hated my poor dear friend. She was jealous of her. Do you remember Olly at the flower show, how rudely she stared at Mrs. Eden's bonnet fresh from Paris. I never shall forget Mrs. Eden's glance at the good soul's peach-coloured gloves. Why where's Olly, Alice?"

"Here I am," said Isolda, coming out of

a window recess with an unusually grave face. "I didn't want to smash the fifth Commandment into smithereens, so I kept out of the circle."

Mrs. Harlay was sometimes afraid of her eccentric child, and indeed often conveniently boasted she "couldn't follow Olly." Returning to her room, she wrote several notes on pink paper.

"Christopher," she said to the rector, who was brushing into ostentatious strength his leonine locks in his dressing-room, "as you wish it, I am ready to receive Mademoiselle as an acquaintance with proper precautions."

"I would wait a little, my dear; the precautions might be on her side, you know."

"Oh you dear literary owl," said Mrs. Harlay gushing. "If Mademoiselle Gautier is as clever as you men seem to think her, she will not refuse my good will."

"But is it good will?"

"To ever so many people! but I love

you, dear, for being so good and kind to the poor girl."

"Poor Minx," added Mrs. Harlay *sotto voce*, adjusting her Louis Quinze bodice, and brushing off some excessive powder. "But whatever my risk, I cannot at this crisis neglect my duties as friend and aunt."

CHAPTER III.

It would be a curious speculation to ascertain which of the sexes were most liable to the temptation of murder. At first sight it would seem that men being in one or two trades and professions required to use lawful violence might so be prepared for unlawful violence. But as the essence of murder is not its blood-shedding, but its unlawfulness, and that fact is particularly impressed on those who are commissioned to kill in due season whether Russians, Turks, or domestic savages; these men, at least, ought to have a truer conception than others of the matter. Which is a truism needless to repeat were it not that as in novels there is increasing confusion between right and wrong, so in a novel some recti-

fication of the confusion may be excused. And while we confess freely, and indeed shamelessly, that all the other ten Commandments are pretty universally broken without punishment in our society; we are dull to perceive that the sixth precept of the Decalogue is suffering a like degradation as the other nine.

It seems probable that a generation or two of progress in popular ethics may educate us to judge of violence, solely by the success of its results, without regard to its abstract lawfulness. And this not only in our judgment of the murder *en masse* with which the wars of this century have made us familiar, but of private assault and battery, without "wager of battle."

In this case it is evident that men will excel, and even if murder be treated as a fine art, women can have no more chance of competing in it than in any other art.

While the old order of morals still obtains, though in a fragmentary state, women

make up for meanness of conception and weakness of execution by their greater indifference to law and their habitual conviction that the end justifies or at least condones the means; and so as things are, women are perhaps not inferior to men in premeditated crime, but, under the new gospel of transcendental selfishness, it may be expected that man will prove master, and by an irony of fate dogmatic utilitarianism will secure the most absolute subjection of women yet known.

Meantime, while the code of "Humanity" is being adjusted, the Ten Commandments have still weight. Individuals are still involuntarily awed by their majesty though Cabinets and Councils are, with the help of modern phrases, accustoming us of the populace to serious breaches of them. Alphonsine Gautier was by no means retrograde in these things, yet at least three old-fashioned precepts were binding on her in ordinary circumstances, and of these one forbade all tricks with life in furthering her plans. In any case it would have been

natural, and almost necessary to her to take what care she could of the woman who had been kind to her. As had been seen in the woodman's cottage the feminine instinct of nursing was strong in her, and she was personally attracted by Mrs. Eden's generous character and intellectual power.

In the luxurious back room of the Geneva *bric-à-brac* shop she had learned some knowledge of men, and in theory she had a contempt for women, but here was one she had not yet imagined. If at last there were no straight way found to relieve her father, to prove her mother's legitimacy, and satisfy her own ambition, some after-thoughts of evil might beset her; but in the first days of Mrs. Eden's illness, the sick woman found an orderly, intelligent helper in Alphonsine, who every hour was less of a stranger, and more of a friend in the house. The local doctor had asked to be reinforced by another from Tunbridge Wells, and they had sent a trained nurse to take charge of the case; for however

obscure the symptoms seemed at first, it was important that no waste of strength, no mistakes, should take place from the outset. When she could be of service, Alphonsine was always ready to help.

Before he went to his room at the inn, after dining at the rectory, Sir Ernest called to inquire. Expecting that he would, Alphonsine in a gown of some soft, white material came to him at once. He was grateful for her readiness, and he looked at her dress with an approval that made her say, "Light colours are best, both for patients and their nurses."

"How is she?"

"You would hardly think her seriously ill, but from the circumstances, I believe, you must expect typhoid fever; pythogenic poisoning the youngest doctor called it, talking to the other."

"Is there danger?"

"Always, Sir Ernest; it is very treacherous. I have seen it at a school. I believe one in ten die."

"And her soul!" muttered Ernest, and

his lips moved with other words that remained inaudible.

"This is a singularly quick case, the poison must have been intense, and that is alarming. Now be very strong and patient, Sir Ernest; it may be many days before you can thank God that she is yours again."

He was startled by her assumption, and he would have been annoyed at a moment of less tension, but she had said words suited to his feelings. He was relieved after the first surprise to find she understood his position, and that she could discuss this terror.

"Mrs. Eden has said nothing special?"

"No, she is dull from the pain in her head; she lies quite quietly. The doctors said, there might be earlier delirium in this case than usual. Trust us, we will do the best for her; perhaps it is well she broke down so soon. She will not have wasted her stock of strength."

"As you have guessed that Mrs. Eden and I may some day be more to one another,"

said Sir Ernest slowly and looking down, "you know how grateful I must be to you for your devotion. You are to a certain extent risking your life for a stranger."

"I am greatly interested in Mrs. Eden."

"I wish I could tell you all my sense of your Christian conduct."

"It isn't particularly Christian, Sir Ernest—simply human."

A sudden energy flashed into his face as he looked up at her.

"Mademoiselle, surely you are not without the faith. You know the strength and joy of it, or you would not volunteer for this task. Others shrink from it."

"You are so true yourself, Sir Ernest, I may be true with you. I have not seen in the world that what you call Christianity makes any one better or kinder to their neighbours. It does not influence me one way or another to know that there was a Jew eighteen centuries ago in advance of his period, who has helped society, no doubt, but whose teaching has founded many

superstitions. Certain beliefs about him seem to make many people happy, and to that I see no objection. When I nurse a sick person, however, I do not think it has anything to do with those beliefs. Sir Ernest, pardon me if I shock you. You know I am of Geneva, and we are of the advanced sort there."

They were standing in the drawing-room at Edenhurst. The windows were open, and twilight still dulled the yellow globe of a single lamp. The air was full of perfume from a cereus in the adjoining conservatory. Anxiety and the excitements of the day had wrought on Ernest's nerves. This open profession of unbelief stung him like a pain. He would not let it pass lest so he should be disloyal.

His hasty words were chiefly quoted from Holy Writ, and with vehemence he rebuked and exhorted.

Alphonsine listened to him silently with a sad look in her quiet face, and gradually his manner softened. He appealed to her urgently for recognition of the one or two

mysteries on which his whole faith was concentrated.

She had heard it often before in polished periods, both from Genevan *momiers* and from itinerant preachers who now and then ventured into the severe air of the "Protestant Rome." Sir Ernest's words had little effect on her, but she was surprised at such simplicity of zeal in a well-dressed, unprofessional gentleman. She saw that his intellect and his judgment were not overwhelmingly superior, but she was not the less touched by his complete abandonment of intellectual pride and independent judgment in the "folly of the cross."

She perceived what power to pursue an end this self-abandonment can give, and like all true children of her time she had vast reverence for power, however manifested. She partly shared Elizabeth's respect for this "vessel of devotion," but she was not in love; nor was she generous and idealizing in her estimates as was Mrs. Eden. So she judged more correctly the

narrowness and want of balance in the man.

"If these things are true," she said softly, "of course there are no truths like them; I have not gone much into them. I have lived like other people from day to day, and not troubled myself about the spiritual world except to think it unreal."

"You will have many spare hours now," said Sir Ernest, and with all his heart—for indeed he was entirely sincere—he urged on her considerations not to be lightly repeated here.

It was not the mere rage of proselytism which inspired him with one or two phrases of real eloquence. He was eager that other souls should participate in his fervour and know its satisfactions. Association is a primary instinct of religious enthusiasm, and one of its chief forces is in the rapid sympathy of those under its influence. There is no stronger social cement than a common and formulated creed. The bitterness of schism, the *odium theologicum* are but defects of its qualities.

"I will read and think," said Mademoiselle Gautier. "I am grateful for your interest. It will help me to persevere in a study that might otherwise be too distasteful."

Sir Ernest lighted a cigar, indeed several cigars before his vigil was over, for instead of going to bed at his inn, he walked on the terrace at Edenhurst till dawn awoke him from his reverie some four hours later. The day had been eventful. To his awakened zeal not least of its events had been the last half-hour's effort to "save a soul." The crude openness, almost defiance, of Mademoiselle Gautier's unbelief excited him. In her he had not to deal with unmeant assents and unreal phrases. He believed himself face to face with the enemy of souls, who had blinded the discernment of so superior a woman as her acts showed her to be.

Mrs. Eden was first in his hopes and fears, but he could not realize any danger for her. He felt sure of her, and that years were before them in which he should win her to sympathy with all his thoughts.

But meantime, by an effort of will he put away from him as a snare the haunting memory of her eyes and of her touch, nor would he indulge ambition by dreams of a restored Harlay Abbot.

So aiming at an exaggerated spirituality he morbidly turned away from legitimate happiness—as "worldliness." And so it happened that he fell to thinking with excessive interest of Mademoiselle Gautier's ghostly condition.

Impossible to say by what fine tact she had divined how she could most powerfully attract Sir Ernest, but she had succeeded in occupying for some time his imagination even as he paced to and fro within sight of the lamp that burned in Mrs. Eden's room.

In his conscious interest Elizabeth was supreme, but Mademoiselle Gautier had become a spiritual patient. He prayed earnestly for Elizabeth before he slept, yet his last thought was of Alphonsine's unbelief.

When Sir Ernest awoke next day, his servant brought him a note that had already

come from Edenhurst. It was a word of comfort from Mademoiselle Gautier. Though her temperature was high Mrs. Eden had passed a moderately quiet night. Twice he read the last line of the note. "I wish I could think as you do; life would be transformed." As he stood meditating the exact meaning of the sentence the local doctor drove by in his dog-cart. The cob in it was quick, but by a short cut Sir Ernest was in time to hear the medical report. The doctor was cautious.

"Impossible to say. Complications so often occur. But one thing is greatly in Mrs. Eden's favour. Her remarkable cheerfulness and courage will be good friends to her. Now I've seen her under various circumstances rather often, and I never gave her credit for this elasticity. I find she had a general idea of the prospect before her. It is a vast help when the invalid hopefully seconds her attendants in their efforts. I never met a better sort of strength of mind. Strong-minded people generally sink in physical trial."

"She is not deceived, I trust, about her illness."

"Not a bit. She has been looking out for the characteristic eruption, and told me herself it was too soon. She got a smart dose of the poison, but she has wonderful energy. Where the nerves are so involved as in this type of fever, that is in her favour. Guard against over-excitement,—but I beg pardon, Sir Ernest, you are not in charge. I am indiscreet! That young person is very sensible I can see. She pulls well with the nurse."

"You approve of Mademoiselle Gautier?"

"Oh, that's her name. Handsome woman. Yes, Mrs. Eden praised her. Always humour these cases, and don't change the people in attendance. Remember, Sir Ernest, we are never sure of our ground in this type, but I beg pardon again. You are not responsible. Every one in the county must be interested, however. I am to meet my colleague in the afternoon, when the symptoms may be more advanced."

So perorating, the important official ran down the steps, sprang into his dog-cart, and whirled off as fast as two very big wheels and a hog-maned cob could take him.

Looking after him, Sir Ernest comforted the tawny St. Bernard dog, who thrust his nose into his friend's listless hand. With a profound sigh of perplexity the dear beast threw himself down, and settled his broad muzzle on his paws for indefinite waiting.

Then a grave and slow procession coming from the rectory path caught Sir Ernest's restless glance. He went hastily to meet it, for he recognized his uncle, on whom leaning heavily, with both hands on his arm, was Mrs. Harlay. She had stopped the doctor, and he walked by the other side of her, arguing and appealing his best.

It was really important to keep out of Mrs. Eden's sight such a woe-begone martyr to duty. The puffs and graces of her dress had collapsed. She was limp

and sad-coloured from head to foot. A servant carried a bag in which were sundry articles that she conceived might be useful. There was an odour as of a wholesale druggist's in the air, pungent whiffs escaped which gave a foresmell of the disinfectants, for which she had sent that morning to Tunbridge Wells.

"As your medical man *ex officio*, though I know of your homœopathic heresy," said the doctor, "I declare your being with Mrs. Eden would be bad for her, and it might be fatal for you."

"It is a duty," said Mrs. Harlay.

"I have sent my children away for the day, poor darlings, and I insist on being at my post. I am not satisfied with things as they are. It is a moment to show what one is made of."

Before so powerful a social authority the doctor could only grow sulkily silent. Mr. Harlay gave up the struggle, Ernest tugged at his moustaches and frowned. Then Mrs. Harlay suddenly became docile. She knew with trained instinct that the

moment had come when the masculine temper refuses further strain.

"At least," she begged with clasped hands, "let me see the housekeeper."

Alphonsine observing the group from an upper window, had guessed its meaning. Mrs. Eden being drowsy, and her nurse and maid in waiting, she had decided that there was no reason why she should not go on with the arrangement and examination of the curiosities, scattered in the various rooms. Mrs. Eden had desired the housekeeper to help Mademoiselle Gautier, and lend her all keys she might require. Cabinets and every likely cupboard were to be ransacked for artistic *roba*.

At the end of the main passage, and away from probable collision with Mrs. Harlay should she come upstairs, was a little room which Alphonsine chose for that morning's searches. It was a grey and threadbare turret room, where when Francis and Philip Eden had been children they had kept their treasures. In it were

still the frame of an obsolete rocking-horse, and the model of a seventy-four of the Trafalgar sort. Many marks on the walls and furniture, of cutting, hammering, and burning instruments, testified to past joys. It had been a whim of the late Mrs. Eden to sit there even when her favourite boy Philip had gone to school, if she had specially tough business on hand. For she had been a woman of business, who never shirked the active care of her boy's estate.

If Mademoiselle Gautier had been only in search of objects of art there did not appear much chance of finding such in the bare room, which looked as if reserved for ghosts to dance in, so old-fashioned was it and empty. But from chance traditions and scraps picked up in the village, eked out by shrewd guesses, Alphonsine believed that old Mrs. Eden had held the key of the secret that she was trying to clear up. Everything connected with the mother of Francis and Philip Eden, was of possible value in the search. The faded fragments

of Mrs. Eden's old life, an embroidery frame, a harp with three loose strings, some hand-screens, painted with a by-gone elegance as different from our standard as novels from the Minerva press were different from our fiction, nick-nacks of which one could barely guess the meaning or use were housed there. They were not particularly dusty, the room was too bare for dust. An old-fashioned cabinet not unlike a spinette in shape, on tapering legs, and with a curved top that let down over a writing desk, was in a corner. The top was locked. None of the keys entrusted to Mademoiselle Gautier would open it, but the veneering of ornamental wood had warped; the ebony setting of the key-hole had fallen out, and it was not difficult, by passing a pen-knife over the bolt, to shoot it back.

There were twenty-four shallow drawers, and twelve pigeon-holes within. Packets of sample seeds, circulars from inventors long-forgotten, and household account-books, instructive to persons who complain

of modern prices. Two packets of yellow letters tied with raw silk, and still smelling heavily of marechal, were in a pigeon-hole apart. They were from friends and gossips, nearly all franked and most of them worth franking, for gossip in those days was concentrated, and described more heroic doings in a more Olympian society than now exists. But a glance through them showed Mademoiselle Gautier that they had no special interest for her. Here and there the mention of "your son Francis" startled her, but such mention was seldom in his praise. She gathered from the letters that his mother had grounds for her preference of Philip. Francis had been a scamp, and not a very honourable one it was evident, and rather a cynical smile curled her mouth as she thought of the present proceedings of his grand-daughter.

Unimportant to her as these letters were they were the first definite link she had met, by which she could touch the actual life of that great-grandmother who

had, as Alphonsine believed, criminally set aside her mother's rights.

"It looks as if the stars in their courses fought for me," thought Mademoiselle Gautier. "Probably truth will prevail, not from any magic virtue in truth, but because it has a persevering friend in me on this occasion."

She paused and gently opened a window, for she felt oppressed by the half-musty, half-perfumed air which hung about the cabinet. The voices of Mrs. Harlay and the housekeeper talking just below came up, but only here and there could she distinguish a phrase. But she heard enough to know that they were speaking of her and not in her praise.

"Qui vivra verra. It is very natural, but all reminds me to lose no time." She put the letters in her pocket, and went on to measure and sound the thin compartments of the cabinet. There were no secret drawers, no decisive papers, as she had hoped, had been forgotten there. In a drawer at the bottom of others was a

dingy account book, duodecimo in size, covered in red leather with a flap, that might have been carried in a pocket, or rather in a reticule of the day. Though discouraged in proportion to her unreasonable hopes, Mademoiselle Gautier resolved to leave no paper or writing unexamined. The book contained entries during the year 1816 of various sums paid by Mrs. Eden, and seemed her diary of gross outgoings. In it were recorded some transactions with her son Francis on his coming of age, when she resigned her guardianship. Some of the entries were therefore large. Evidently they had been meant for her eye only, as here and there among the figures were touches of personal feeling: as thus, "200*l.* for my own plate, left by mistake to Francis. This is his, and not my valuation."

"275*l.* rent for one year's further occupancy of this place, namely, the house and home farm. A stranger's rent exacted by my son."

Further on there was this entry:—

"Four hundred livres, or 15*l.* 12*s.* at present exchange for searches at Versoix near Geneva."

Alphonsine grew very pale, her lips were so pressed together that they lost colour. She was indeed touching the clue important to her. She glanced with hot eyes at two months of home expenses, without relevancy, but at last, and she could have sworn she had seen the words before, though but in a dream,—

"10,000 livres or 385*l.* to A. B.; a golden bridge to a retreating enemy."

There the clue broke off. There was no further observation even remotely connected with Geneva.

"Nothing to show the reason for our annuity. There must be some account of it in the Ravenscroft office, and that is closed to me." Alphonsine sat down to think the more intently. "If I act on him," she thought, "it must be through his honour, that is, I imagine, his weak point. Still I have done something to-day. I have strengthened my own convictions.

Courage! even to beggar this sick woman! yet that can be and shall be gently and generously done, if indeed Sir Ernest had not so furiously concerned himself about my soul. Va!"

Success of this uncertain sort did not improve Mademoiselle Gautier's temper. Hardened, readier to play the part that should best profit her, strong and unflinching, she replaced the cabinet as it had been turned with its face to the wall. She returned with fresh interest to her superintendence of Mrs. Eden's nurse; ready when the time came to meet Mrs. Harlay or to coquet with Sir Ernest's creed, to play at controversy or at friendship with all the advantages that indifference bestows.

But there was no chance of meeting Mrs. Harlay. She had no real mind to face either fever or her aggrieved governess. Alphonsine, however, found traces of her visit in the stiff and warlike dignity of the housekeeper's salutation, and the more explosive spite of Mrs. Eden's maid when

she met them in colloquy near their mistress's door.

"Would you please say that I shall not want luncheon until two o'clock, I am going for a walk as Mrs. Eden is so quiet," she said, looking straight into the housekeeper's round, beady eyes, which stared and goggled in return.

"Indeed! But perhaps you are not aware that my lady never allows the hours of her house to be altered."

"Mrs. Hewet, you will do as I say, if you please. Later on you may find that it was prudent to do so."

Mademoiselle Gautier passed on graceful and serene, with a look that the experienced servant knew meant command. She surrendered discreetly to superior orders, and signalled Tompkins to restrain the impertinence on her tongue.

When Alphonsine had swept down the broad stairs, Tompkins exploded. "Well," she said, in a voice low with fury, "am I dreaming?"

"A scum and scruff of a Swiss inter-

stice to play these airs. If my dear mistress were not on her typerd bed, I would not bear it. To old servants like me. I never thought so much of that old Harlay as since you tell me she warned you against that slimy Thing."

"Whatever you mean by interstice—"

"It's French for governess; naturally you don't know, Mrs. Hewet."

"Well, my dear soul, I've lived longer and had more experience of families than you. There's a mystery in the conduct of that young person. Now we have Scripture for it, it's not right to fly in the face of a mystery and take it in vain."

"Mrs. Hewet, begging your pardon, I do not pretend to be so educated a pusson as I know you to be, but I have known my mistress since she was a girl in short frocks, and never knew her mixed up in no mysteries. If there should be such a thing, it belongs to this house and not to ours."

"Tut, tut! most of the first families have mysteries, but there is something I

cannot fathom in this young person's manners to me. She takes a deal on herself if she has no call to do it. But here's the nurse, and if you take my advice you'll be mum. Well, Mrs. Jones, and how is our dear lady?"

"She really is so quiet and cheerful that I am beginning to think it's a slight attack. Gastric disturbance small, temperature moderate. These doctors are great alarmists. I know their little game, bless you, my dear good souls, don't be frightened. She'll pull through."

This light-hearted and scientific sort of nurse very much surprised Mrs. Hewet, as for Tompkins she was too travelled a person to be surprised at anything.

But Mrs. Hewet, remembering after all, her position and powers, recovered herself and said with ostentatious kindness,—

"You must require a little change, nurse. Have your dinner in 'the room.' The still-room maid will wait on you, me and Miss Tompkins will stay with our dear mistress while you are away."

"Where's she?" asked Mrs. Jones, with a nod towards an ideal Mademoiselle Gautier.

"Gone out to amuse herself."

"Well, ladies, I really may leave my patient in perfect comfort with you; should any new symptom suddenly supervene, send for me instantly. Plenty of oxygen—and quiet, if you please."

"Bless the woman, hasn't she a tongue!" said Tompkins, as the highly-trained and improved Gamp disappeared. "I've seen Mrs. Eden through worse attacks than this, only these doctors when they consult always kick up a fuss. Single they may not, but put them together and sick folk have very little chance. Not that I mean that now; I don't believe there is much wrong, such rubbish!"

In fact, Mrs. Eden appeared to her faithful servants much as usual. She asked Mrs. Hewet many questions about the house, and planned one or two small improvements. Then seeing Tompkins busy at her presses she declared that she

felt quite well, that her illness was a false alarm, and that she would put on her dressing-gown and sit up a while.

Mrs. Hewet was frightened, but Tompkins elated, encouraged her mistress's whim. When she had smoothed her hair and put on a morning gown there was a brilliance in Mrs. Eden's eyes and hectic spots on her cheeks that deceived both the women who really were devoted to her, and would not have had her risk anything if they had known.

"Is Sir Ernest Harlay here?" she asked, as she moved unsteadily out of her room into the next, which was a sitting-room where she saw her intimates and gave audience to her village clients.

"Oh, my dear mistress, I beg of you to be prudent."

"I will stay a little here, and if Sir Ernest calls he can see me."

With sudden weakness she sat down, then feeling unreasonable vexation at their fussiness, she told the women to leave her for half-an-hour.

Meantime, Mademoiselle Gautier had gladly gone out. She felt at once excited and oppressed. She had touched a clue, but it was slight, and would have been invisible to one who had not her resolute conviction. Every energy of thought must be given to it, and as a clear brain requires good health, she left for an hour or two the atmosphere, where the faint mustiness of fever was perceptible, and slowly walked to and fro in the perfumed shade of the great pines, through which fell the rays of the mid-day sun that lighted all the life and stir of the calm woodland air.

CHAPTER IV.

Having left his aunt at the rectory in better spirits since she had opened her mind to Mrs. Hewet, Sir Ernest found himself returning to Edenhurst. He had yet to thank Alphonsine for her early message. Of course, they met in the perfumed shade of the great pines. How could it have been otherwise? Alphonsine was personally rather bored than pleased, but she never let personal whims interfere with work. Whatever exaggerations for or against the influence of birth be current, it is certain that some traits in her character were not what would have been natural to a Geneva girl of the middle class. But while Mademoiselle Gautier proved breeding in a certain self-reliant courage and fine

defiance of ill-hap, in her indifference to Mrs. Harlay's discourtesy and her unembarrassed acceptance of Mrs. Eden's friendliness, it must be remembered by the English reader that very different estimates of social position obtain in France (and Geneva boasts itself a *petit Paris*) from those popular among us.

Alphonsine was the child of her father's race in her indifference to English titles, which were, as yet, barely comprehended of her. Men were, for the most part, on a level as *ces messieurs*, while at the same time she had carried her Eden temper into a proud assumption that the Chénevières, merchants, shopkeepers by circumstance, were equal to any average milor; superior it would seem by education to many of the stammering, shy, and ill-bred Englishmen she had dealt with.

The rudeness of Mrs. Harlay seemed an outbreak of "Britannic spleen." If Sir Ernest made love to her or offered an evangelical friendship, it did not seem to her the miracle threatening social cataclysm

that it would have appeared to an unaccredited governess of the English order.

As it was, even though it had become known that she had sat habitually in the back treasure room of her father's shop and had learnt her knowledge of *bric à brac* by dealing in it, her very audacity might have won her a more secure footing than she would have had as a waif of the teaching class. It is possible to startle social authorities into respect by audacious beauty and self-assertion.

Alphonsine, meantime, had hardly yet perceived how important is orthodox approval, and that "claimants" need all the sympathy they can secure to balance the nine legal points of possession. But for complicated reasons she desired Ernest Harlay's good will, and however urgent were her private meditations she made ready to talk to him.

She gave him all possible news of Mrs. Eden, guiding his impressions as she wished, and not failing subtly to interest him about herself.

The path they followed was a short cut used by all intimates and servants coming from the principal gate, so they hardly noticed a well-dressed, well-bearded man who touched his half military cap as he passed. At the moment, Mademoiselle Gautier was saying,—

"I had expected to find an English rectory the citadel of faith, but your uncle and still more Mrs. Harlay have emancipated themselves from what I thought belonged to the Christian creed."

Sir Ernest was heartily concerned. He felt himself bound to repair the damage done, and he was persuaded that he could. His creed seemed so easy to him. He had never attempted to reconcile it with the facts of life, and he did not guess the discrepancies plain to some. Life had not the reality to him that it has to men of stronger natures; problems of humanity, the oppositions of science, were no anxiety to him.

He was quite sure that he could lead this erring soul by his narrow gate. Over-sure

also of himself, with an ingenuous conceit he did not consider what social misunderstandings, not to say personal mischief, might come of his entirely sincere zeal.

Meantime Mrs. Eden feverishly shifted the writing gear on the table, and even tried to write a note to Ernest, but a chill shiver seized her, and a dizziness which forced her to lie back on the sofa, weary with a weariness that crushed even love in her. She thought the sensation would pass off, and she did not call Tompkins. But Tompkins presently knocked at the door, and with hardly suppressed excitement announced the arrival of Cesare the courier.

"What has brought him back? I thought he was to inherit a fortune and settle down."

"Oh, m'm, I cannot pretend to guess his reasons."

Tompkins was secretly sure that Cesare was come to offer that "man's hand" which she told her confidant, the village postmistress, she saw "like a cloud," identifying herself obscurely with the prophet Elijah.

"I will see him, send him up."

In vain were Tompkins' remonstrances. Mrs. Eden was unusually imperative. She was impatient to Mrs. Hewet and very unlike herself. But in their hearts the women would not believe in her serious illness. They had a secret satisfaction in "spiting" the interlopers who had established themselves as nurses, and so Cesare was shown into Mrs. Eden's sitting-room. Besides the courier's manner had been important and even mysterious. Tompkins pined to know why, and thought she should soon know were his news put in words within the walls of Edenhurst.

But Cesare closed the door of the sitting-room carefully behind him, and stood near the writing-table waiting for Mrs. Eden to speak. He had become sincerely attached to her for her frank kindness to him while he was in her service, and with a loyal and personal attachment that is oftener found abroad than at home.

"I was told that madame was ill, but I find her looking well," he said in reply to

a word of welcome. "I have come from Domo d'Ossola expressly to see madame."

"Can I serve you then in any way?"

"No, madame. I am conscious of madame's kindness, but it is I who think I can serve madame. Am I sure of her attention for ten minutes?"

Mrs. Eden rang a hand-bell, and with the same unusual imperiousness that had marked her manner since she got up, ordered that no one should disturb her. Mrs. Jones, the nurse, bustled up as she spoke, but she fell back very obsequiously, judging justly that no risk should be run of exciting her patient. She was exceedingly angry with the optimist housekeeper and maid.

"To think that when my eyes are turned away for five minutes, there should be such fools in the world. Most likely you've brought on delirium ferox by the night. What is the use of doctors and nurses if their orders are disobeyed in this way?"

"Begging your pardon, m'm," said Tompkins, ready to cry with vexation, "but I

did not know that you had any call to order me. If my dear lady suffers it will be from causes given by other people who think themselves infallible."

"Well," said Mrs. Hewet, "I'm sure we all wish to see our dear mistress do well, and if there be any chance of that ferox turn, which nurse has mentioned, we had better not stand talking too near her."

"Why, Cesare, how can you serve me?" said Mrs. Eden; "make haste, for I may not be able to sit up much longer. It's nothing about—nothing has happened!" she exclaimed, while her cheeks flushed, and a painful light rose in her eyes.

"Madame, I beg of you to be calm. I do not know myself the full meaning of what I have to communicate. But I judged it only loyal to put the affair in your hands."

"Make haste! quick!" said Elizabeth, with chattering teeth, which, however, she managed to control.

"Madame is very suffering I see now. She will remember that I spoke to her of my uncle who was dying when we crossed

the Simplon. I was in time to receive his blessing, such as it was, poor soul, but precious to me in any case. I am heir to all his effects, madame."

"I hope he was rich," said Mrs. Eden impatiently.

"Richer than I wished, madame, I had the honour of telling you that in the flower of his youth my uncle met with an accident which paralyzed him. His speech and ideas were affected. He has been little better than an idiot for fifty years."

"And then? quickly Cesare."

"That occurred in the autumn of 1816, madame. I was born the same year, my parents were drowned in an inundation of the Tosa, my uncle adopted me, and so I am his heir."

There was hesitation in his manner, he could not get beyond his heirship, but wiping his honest, kindly face, he said quickly, "I find in his papers, madame, these. God forbid that I should dishonour myself by not making restitution of them. Try to forgive my poor uncle!" The courier

abruptly threw down on the table a very worn and greasy pocket-book.

"It was his craze, we thought, to have it always by him and untouched. It came to be the means by which he was governed. The women believed it was a spell. Once he mislaid it, and his excitement was terrible. I never examined it till after his death. Let madame take it, it is freely hers."

A dead faintness came over Elizabeth, who, however, had not comprehended Cesare's words. But the sordid, greasy thing disgusted her.

"Leave me," she muttered, "send some one."

"Madame then knows all, and it is as I thought."

"Leave me, come again when I am better."

"Madame will lock that up very carefully, her fate is within it. I pray for her recovery."

Stooping he just kissed her hand, which still restlessly played with a paper knife. Yet he left the room perplexed and disappointed.

Mrs. Eden had not recognized his service, yet he knew the papers were important to her, she seemed overcome, and he thought that she had some uneasy knowledge of what had been so long concealed in the imbecility of his uncle. Morandi had reckoned these papers as a fortune even in his helpless dotage. They contained a secret, as Cesare guessed, though but in part, which could affect the ownership of Edenhurst. Yet Mrs. Eden had not looked at them, had not thanked him.

"The mother of the drowned man seems to have been less vague when even for copies she paid ten thousand francs. Ah! I am doubtless a fool for my generosity, yet what a noble woman to the tips of her nails. Va! Cesare thou hast done right. No good came of my uncle's tricks with his drowned master's papers. I have luck enough, and my little girl at Vogogna will love me better. Old Tompkins, thou art truly imbecile to turn thy parchment cheek as if for a kiss. I am not young, but all

the better do I mock myself of old maids, and, heaven, how many I have had to humour!"

For all that he made himself charming to Tompkins, and pleased Mrs. Hewet so much that he was made free of the "room," and provided with a bed until Mrs. Eden could see him again, which, before night came it was evident might not be for many days.

When in answer to Mrs. Eden's bell the nurse hurriedly resumed her charge, she found her patient lying in dead paleness on the sofa. There was no opposition now as she was lifted into bed, though she muttered dreamily assurances that she would soon be well, and, when possible, wished to see Sir Ernest Harlay.

But the time of obedience to her will was past. With great skill and a trained gentleness she was restrained from further imprudence. Mademoiselle Gautier who had come in from her walk, helped to soothe the semi-delirious excitement. She was still full of thought about Mrs. Eden

the elder's diary, and it happened that she overlooked the pocket-book commended to Mrs. Eden by her courier. It slipped from Elizabeth's tired hand between the mattress and the bedstead, and remained there. And Mrs. Eden grew so much worse that there arose no further question of her intercourse with any outside people. She had entered the shadowy state in which familiar objects and thoughts assume new forms and meanings ; when cherished plans and hopes lose relevancy and phantoms come and go, and the brain works in disregard of its customary laws and impressions. What is monstrous and impossible becomes matter of course, and habitual observances that seemed part of character and even being grow foolish to the morbid conception. The divine power of the will being lessened there is insurrection of the nerves, and the wheels of life spin wildly as they will.

When the doctors inspected her that evening, Mrs. Eden had passed into the spectral world where only fragments of habit remain, making it unspeakably

ghastly. It was a rapid case, and already the distinctive rose spots had showed themselves here and there. Still though no one could predict its treacheries there were hopeful signs, and one of them was the absence of moral depression. Who shall say how far Elizabeth's training and self-control helped her even in her nightly delirium?

Mademoiselle Gautier's attitude was admirable during the fortnight of unremitting care that followed. The doctors, the rector, and in an unrecognized way Sir Ernest gave her high approval. So it came about that she became more or less known to the anxious county. Such notes and inquiries as escaped Mrs. Harlay's diligence had to be answered by Alphonsine. More than one neighbour incredulous of infection liked to do a little heroism and call personally. Always well dressed and with that particular excellency of dress which is caught by persons of cosmopolitan acquaintances, Mademoiselle Gautier knew how to reply with well-bred equality to all

comers, among whom was often Mr. Dene, for L'Anglais du Dru had returned to his Sussex home. Her mild, sweet face, sweet enough for a wimple, obtained respect, and itself contradicted various hints of Mrs. Harlay's. Nor was Alphonsine seriously depreciated even at the rectory; it would have been too unpopular, not to say that Mrs. Harlay stood in some awe of Isolda, whose frankness and hearty thoroughness was apt to overthrow in disastrous exhibition her mother's delicate conclusions.

Meantime affairs will run their course, though Mrs. Eden's fever showed no abatement, and Mrs. Harlay was a martyr to suppressed spites and postponed parties.

Mr. Ravenscroft had come down from London for an hour twice within the first ten days, and had seen the doctors and lectured the servants, and even quelled the improved nurse by correcting her in a misapplied bit of medical jargon. He was civil and obliged to Mademoiselle Gautier, though hardly cordial when he perceived the new standing she had with curious

haste taken up at Edenhurst. After seeing her and Sir Ernest, as he chanced to do, in *tête-a-tête* conference, he conceived suspicions of her disinterestedness.

He made no further reference to her Genevese friends the annuitants. In large practice as he was, however, the Lullin charge on Edenhurst often recurred to his thoughts. Thorough friend of Mrs. Eden and executor of her husband's will, he had more interest in it than if it had come before him as mere business. But he seldom wasted words; he had written to Geneva, and would wait for the answer. He little guessed it had been stopped by a telegram to her father from his sweetfaced acquaintance. Alphonsine, however, found ten minutes, while he was waiting for a train on the occasion of his second visit, to ask him if there were not indeed a mystery, and that an important one, in the origin of her friend's annuity. Raising her soft, brown eyes to his vexed face, for the whole thing being obscure annoyed him, she said,—

"Did not the elder Mrs. Eden give this money as the price of silence on some family dispute? Did she not pay other large sums to secure her end?"

Mr. Ravenscroft started and stared at her. He was a man of most punctilious even crochety honour. The mere hint that he could have known of such a transaction, still more that he could countenance it, was odious to him. But he was also cautious. Without any gift himself of conversational "fishing" he did not suspect that she was playing at brag; he however, grew reserved, with instant consciousness, not again to be thrown off, that he was dealing with a subtle woman on the other side.

"I have not thoroughly examined the circumstances under which the annuity was granted," he said dryly, and with a polite hope that her watch by Mrs. Eden's bedside might not over-tire her the lawyer went to meet his train.

For the first ten minutes he was discomposed. Mademoiselle Gautier's words

reminded him of a dozen trifles, not before weighed, but which gained meaning if indeed the annuity had been given as a sop to claimants.

"I will have proper search made without delay," he thought, crushing his *Times* together in extreme annoyance. If it were true that the old lady had taken these dangerous precautions, and—"by Jove, some one in the office must have helped her—I trust not my father," he muttered. He was bound to protect Mrs. Eden.

Then he smiled at his unnecessary forecast. Most likely the girl did not know what she was talking about. Girls seldom do put meaning into their talk, except when there is a man to get round. Why on earth should there have been a fraudulent transaction! He refused to accept such a hypothesis, though certainly as a boy in the office he had always kept out of the stern old Mother Eden's way. Then floating feathers in the atmosphere of Squire Philip's reserved life came before him with aggravating recurrence of this

and that memory. Certain topics avoided, certain plans for the property neglected up to the time of Mr. Eden's second marriage, when he more actively interfered in matters he had before listlessly abandoned to his first wife.

The clearness of Mademoiselle Gautier's words had startled him, yet as he turned round and round in the circle of Eden law affairs, and thought out all he knew of Eden's rights and wrongs, it did not occur to him that Alphonsine could be herself a danger. She had picked up notions from her friends—evidently close friends at Geneva. If his doubt of her as a guest at Edenhurst took form it was of her as a handsome woman, inclined to use her powers for matrimonial and social ends. He had his fixed idea of female tendencies, and tested her by it, only fancying that intercourse with the "plaguey Lullins" had suggested to her a fancy which might or might not prove a clue to the mystery of the annuity. So he ordered all the office papers of 1816, or such of them as still existed, to be ran-

sacked, and troubled himself no more about the young woman at Edenhurst.

His evident ignorance disappointed Alphonsine. If he knew nothing, who in England should. Yet though he knew nothing, he at least had accepted the idea that there was something to know and something serious. She took from her pocket a letter yet more urgent than the last. Threatening, reproaching, and appealing by turns, and mentioning the doctor's fear of "meningite" for M. Chénevière, the letter wound up by a passionate appeal that Alphonsine should return, and not any more offend their best friend, M. Duval.

"Sooner than that, this Englishman," thought Alphonsine with a fine scorn in her mouth, "and yet I doubt not M. Duval will console my mother and look after her stocks and shares while I am playing on woman's generosity as a winning number!" She carefully went through to herself her beliefs, her hopes, her slight advance to any discovery. "All comes to him who knows how to wait." "I know I shall suc-

ceed, be it devil or angel who so assures me. Va! the devils and angels are certainly necessities, sometimes useful, sometimes destructive. This fever, who can foretel lits end? If fatal, can I with prudence expect more from this weak Sir Ernest than from Mrs. Eden. He will be rich and perhaps moved to some violence of fanaticism by the circumstances. If she recover, as indeed I hope heartily, for she is a noble woman, it might be a brilliant hazard to tell her all the truth. Heavens no! who could try so forlorn a chance? She is different from most, yet at bottom who can trust? I am over-generous to think of it."

And so the lawyer and the adventuress judged of their neighbours by those general ideas which so seldom fit particular cases. Yet with each decade of social evolution as it is tending now, we seem to live more in a world of undertones and half tints that seldom challenge the eye. Few men can be trusted to act as might have been counted on under the old order. Species

is lost in immense variety, and most laws are misty, but particularly those which define virtue and vice. Who can be sure of a woman's possessing her legitimate foibles? Let us hope that a conservative reaction may restore to us at least the "Cynthia of the minute" if we may not hope for Shakespeare's heroines in the "Kingdom of Man."

Affairs looked black for the Harlays of both generations, while the pythogenic plague trailed its poisonous length through the first weeks of August.

Money is in its plenty and in its lack dangerous to the finer points of character, and it was by the finer parts of his character that Ernest Harlay was bound in love to Mrs. Eden. From the first he had disliked the rough jokes of the rector, but when he began really to love her, the consciousness of fortune grew hateful. The pressure of her large estate, joined to the pressure of his own poverty, cankered his frank devotion, and made him suspicious of himself and of her. He was

troubled by conflicting scruples. It might be wrong to hesitate when large means of usefulness seemed within his grasp, and again it was doubtfully honourable to let Elizabeth join herself to his ruined fortunes.

It was his nature so to torment himself, and doubtless it was but a poor and slight nature. He could not forget himself and his responsibilities, and his debtor and creditor account with Providence.

Troubles were thickening round him, and as he rode to and fro Harlay Abbot he sought relief in a more keen and even feverish pursuit of spiritual thought, self analysis, and Biblical adaptations.

Small people sink faster in the slough of debt than the bigger victims, and the rector was more personally harassed than his nephew. His ingenious adaptations of new wine to old bottles, and old revelations to new sceptics, were checked. He looked shrunken and wan, and so less disposed to endure his wife's voluminousness of dress and talk. There was a deepening shadow on him.

"The whole summer is passing away," observed Mrs. Harlay pathetically as one morning she bent forward in her near-sighted way to see what hot dishes there were for breakfast, "and we are very dull. Things were so different when I was a girl. There was not the same constant effort. The whole neighbourhood is depressed by the fever brought into our midst by that horrid woman."

Mr. Harlay sopped his dry toast in his tea, worry had disturbed his liver. He made no answer.

"I'm sure," continued Mrs. Harlay, "I'm glad, Olly, that you have become a little less outrée in your language. Still it is not cheerful when you sit and sulk all day."

"Mrs. Harlay," adjured the rector, who had just pushed a dish from before him, "as I do keep a cook, supposed to be good, why is my bacon served with cinder sauce?"

"Don't ask me, my love, I was obliged to give her warning yesterday."

"And may I be informed why?" said Mr. Harlay, with ominous calm, for his cook was a special mercy not lightly to be despised.

"I cannot enter into details, Mr. Harlay."

"Oh I'll supply the details," said Isolda defiantly; "Jennings took a message for me to Mademoiselle Gautier."

"Amelia," said the rector, and when he thus addressed his wife without circumlocution the family knew that the "dynastic tyrannies" of the household were about to assert themselves. "Have I or not insisted on your dropping this hostility? Women are by way of having wits, but in social business they seem as great fools after all as in every other."

"At least Mr. Harlay it would set a better example if you reserved your abuse, —yes, your abuse of me—for your study. What a spectacle is this for your poor daughters! Audrey, my love, go and practise."

Mrs. Harlay in her virtuous serenity rose superior to the worried pastor. He

was generally patient with a certain cultivated scorn, and she had forgotten how the meekest man and most obedient father can at bay be fierce. Mrs. Harlay taking possession, as it were, of the pulpit, thus addressed her audience:—

"I labour to carry out your father's wishes, even when they are contrary to my judgment. Your education is entirely thrown on me, bad as is my health. My wish to see my girls fill their position suitably is made a crime." Here Mrs. Harlay's calm gave way, and sobs were imminent when, with a clatter the breakfast things sprung half an inch from the table, a very considerable oath broke the sanctity of the domestic hearth and Mr. Harlay all aflame declared that he would have an end of this humbug, that "his cook, his cook! should not be sent on errands, and there should be a new leaf turned, and that sooner than was expected."

There was a pause. The girls looked down, discreetly reefing canvas under the squall.

With resolute firmness the rector swallowed his tea, but unfortunately for the tragic dignity of his attitude the last mouthful went wrong and while he was yet coughing—

"It is indeed time," said Mrs. Harlay, folding her hands and addressing the portrait of her father which hung just behind the rector. With a noble grace signing to her children to follow her, she passed in a flutter of trimmings and rustle of ribbons from the room.

Isolda kept her place at the table. She made geometrical puzzles out of bits of toast, and there was silence. Her father leant his head on his hand; the yellow hair which he rejoiced in as a Teuton, an eldest son of the Aryan race and heir to all the ages, now, however, growing faded and thin, fell forward on his square white forehead. He was entirely dejected and ashamed of his irritability. A post-bag full of lawyer's letters, a wife whose selfish frivolity grew more hateful to him every day, and a desolation of unreality in all the circumstances of his life, pressed on him.

It is needless to suggest other yet gloomier thoughts that shapeless as they were had power. He shrank from their darkness while he refused to admit it as possible. It was the darkness that is without form and void, not even haunted by ill angels, the scepticism which is simple negation, and is reaction from too eager a worship of knowledge. Mr. Harlay was a man of ordinary goodness. He gave gentlemanlike assent to the elaborate and scientific religion which, with whatever mental power he had, he endeavoured to adapt to the latest currents of thought. It must not be thought that he was unusually vexed with doubt. The friction of a foolish and ill-regulated home multiplies such hours of depression and cramps spiritual elasticity. The pull of existence was heavy on him just then, whether he were visiting his people or elaborating at home his ingenious compromises. Probably only a very honest Englishman with English capacity for not seeing inconvenient truth could have so manfully maintained a position that had neither comfort nor logical consistency,

neither the support of authority or of intimate conviction for its daily endurance. The slight, tired man might well lean his head on his hands as his wife sweeping her younger daughters before her left him to gather up his letters, and to answer their demands and impertinences as best he could so as to maintain for her and Olly the social struggle perhaps for another year. It had not been the custom of the house to show one another affection. The affectation of unaffectionateness in vogue had encouraged roughness of gesture. Respect and diffidence had been suppressed, but all the more effectually had marks of confidence and kindliness also disappeared. So when Isolda silently laid her hand on her father's shoulder and stooped to kiss gently his bowed head, he was as surprised as if a "dumb ass speaking had rebuked the madness of the prophet."

"All right, father! I wish I knew what was bothering you. I wish you'd let me be some good. I do feel awfully the shame of it all sometimes."

But money troubles not being discus-

sible, Mr. Harlay, startled and touched as he was by the sudden gleam of kindness, could only take Olly's hand and stroke it.

"I can't go into it all, my dear, with you, but you may as well get your habit and come with me to Eden hatch this morning. Ride Nigger boy as much as you can."

"I was keeping him off the summer roads for a hunt or two."

"My dear, you are a good girl, and I hope you have sense under your nonsense. I don't wish it talked of, but I have nearly settled to exchange this for London work, and don't think London means gaiety. It means drudgery and discomfort such as you never knew before."

"Well, father, I'll make the most of old Nigger boy. If Mrs. Eden recovers I dare say she'll buy him."

"Olly," said the rector suddenly, "I wish you would tell me what you think of Ernest's—of his—I mean—"

"His chances with Mrs. Eden? I think they are good, but one never knows if he will run straight."

"You're sure he's trying?"

"I haven't seen them together lately of course. Do you wish for it?"

"I thought I wished for it, but I don't suppose it will make much difference. By the way, do you find as much fault as the others with Mademoiselle Gautier? It's very well to say she is in a false position, one can't help oneself, and she seems to me to have been self-sacrificing."

"Audrey hates her," said Olly reflectively, "the child has great instinct. I don't think I should have liked her so much if she had not been badly treated. I tell you what, father, if you wish Ernest to marry Mrs. Eden it's not a good thing for him to be so much about just now."

"What do you mean?" asked Mr. Harlay, rather crossly.

"Ernest is such a muff, and Mademoiselle Gautier is the cleverest girl I know, and about the handsomest after her fashion."

"I believe that's the reason you're all down on her; women are always ready to spoil affairs for some petty spite."

"And men," observed Isolda sententiously, "always talk of women as if they were so many French rolls baked in the same pattern of the same dough."

"Go and get ready, my dear," said the rector, somewhat cheered.

They rode through the Edenhurst grounds, meaning to inquire for the invalid. The news of her was excellent. The local doctor was leaving the door, and told them that though there was no crisis the disease was abating. The patient's expression of countenance was almost natural, but her weakness was very great.

"She is looking positively beautiful; a pink flush on her cheeks, her pupils dilated, and she is remarkably bright and cheerful. It is extraordinary how much moral influences have to do with such a quick recovery from a certainly severe dose of sewer poison. No doubt Mrs. Eden is a prosperous woman, but she does uncommon credit to her prosperity."

While they were talking Sir Ernest rode up quickly.

"Where have you been, old man?" said Isolda. "We hav'n't seen you for an age. Hav'n't you been over?"

"Why, Sir Ernest has been at the 'Eden Arms' off and on," blundered the doctor.

"I'm going now to Harlay Abbot," said Ernest, looking at his watch. "I have an appointment at twelve there."

The doctor serious, but knowing, bid them good-bye, and Sir Ernest, flapping the reins backwards and forwards on the mane of his horse, said:—

"I've made up my mind after all to sell the Moat Wood. Woodruffe, of Woodruffe, Gall, & Co., is to meet me about it to-day."

It was a blow to the rector. He felt as if he had a share in the old trees. He guessed that some hitch had come in his nephew's wooing, and he sorely mistrusted this sudden change of intention, for Ernest had protested often that though he might have to sell his inheritance, he would at least not disfigure it. Something in Ernest's manner warned him not to ask questions or obtrude advice.

"Won't you look us up when you come back? I got some incense to cure Gyp's distemper the other day, and we'll fumigate you," said Olly. "I'm sure Mr. Wright, our new curate, would like to practise with a censer."

"I don't know when I shall be over again. Mrs. Eden is better."

"Well, good-bye."

And they rode their several ways.

"I suppose it will be some days before Mrs. Eden is visible," said the rector to Isolda. "Ernest is a hopelessly odd fellow. I believe he finds her fortune the chief drawback in his courtship. I'm glad that she'll soon be herself again. Here's a bore, Padnag has cast a shoe, my dear," added the rector, stooping over his horse's off shoulder. "If we turn we're sure to find it, and I'll have it put on in the village."

The shoe had been dropped the other side of the house of Edenhurst, and so it chanced that the rector and Olly came upon Sir Ernest, who, for all his hurry, had got off his horse and was walking by the

side of Mademoiselle Gautier in very earnest talk. Before they joined him he got on his horse, and, with a wave of his hand to them, rode quickly away.

"If it weren't for the mother," said Isolda, very gravely, "I'd stop and speak to her; we have made great mistakes."

It was the first time she had seen her sister's late governess since her dismissal, and her woman's tact quickly felt that Mademoiselle Gautier had assumed an altogether new position. There was a calm and dignified good-breeding in the indifference with which she returned her late employer's bow which startled Isolda. She could not but guess that there was a man and a marriage in the case, for Olly did not know exactly how far Sir Ernest had advanced in courtship of Mrs. Eden.

"She has got hold of Ernest, papa!"

"Well," said the rector, hardly controlling another outburst of temper such as the morning had seen, "his ruin will serve him right."

In his disappointment he wanted at once

to lay the case before his wife, for he had, after all, great faith in her diplomacy, but Olly, less believing, persuaded him to wait till the thing dreaded was more certain.

"I never trusted him to run straight," said Olly reflectively.

CHAPTER V.

Meantime Alphonsine, while noting with equanimity that Sir Ernest's interest in her soul was deepening and softening, remained herself intent on her ambition. Often, when arranging Mrs. Eden's pillows, had she been within a hand's-breadth of Cesare's pocket-book, which would have solved the mystery that stood between her and her end. She had listened attentively to such phrases as were coherent of Mrs. Eden's delirium, but they ran on Guise Court, and persons and places unknown. Once the sick woman had suddenly asked for Cesare, and then, imagining him there, she said that she would take care of the pocket-book; but she was sure its contents had no value for her, and it was very dirty.

"My fate within it!" she muttered, laughing softly, "why, I was not born in 1816. Poor Cesare does not guess where my fate is."

And then she talked of trees, and still waters, and dragon-flies, and wandered aimlessly into a region of impossible dates and figures. The words had remained in Alphonsine's memory, for 1816 was to her a noteworthy year. In it her mother had been born at Versoix, and in it the elder Mrs. Eden had paid four hundred pounds in foreign money to an A.B., evidently, as her wish suggested, connected with Francis Eden's foreign death.

She did not know how to fit together the pieces of her puzzle, however, until, as it chanced, after the Harlays had passed her some ten minutes, the courier Cesare overtook her. He had lingered on, imagining Mrs. Eden's fever to be but an ague, and that he might see her any day; but he could not wait longer away from his new property near Domo d'Ossola. He had heard plenty of gossip about Mademoiselle

Gautier in the "room." That she was an "artful creechur" in Tompkin's eyes; that she made a still room of Mrs. Eden's boudoir to cook her nasty messes, as Mrs. Hewet reported; but that for evil purposes, doubtless, she certainly had been attentive to their mistress, and that she was Swiss.

Different as are Genevese and Tessinese, still, in this land of inscrutable, half-mad English, it was something to find a member of the federation, and Cesare determined to make his compatriot's acquaintance, and entrust her with his anxiety.

He had considerable acquaintance with ladies. He was prepared to be friendly, he would accost Mademoiselle with the little touch of gallantry which he allowed himself to poor companions and the like, many of whom he had known as they gyrated with their great ladies on the Continent.

He saw in Alphonsine at once a Genevese, not of the highest class, but also something that changed his kindly airs to the difference with which he treated his *miladis*.

With a sweeping bow he begged permission to inquire how Mrs. Eden was.

"I have waited at great inconvenience to see Madame again, but I am assured that for another fortnight it will be impossible, and I am forced to return to my country without the honour and joy of witnessing her restoration."

"Can I give any message? Mrs. Eden's intelligence is fast returning: anything important I can explain with caution."

"Mademoiselle will excuse my entering into details; with every confidence in Mademoiselle they are superfluous. However, it is of the last importance that Madame should properly estimate the documents I had the honour of giving her. I address myself frankly to Mademoiselle, as a person of education and superiority, doubtless devoted to that dear and honoured lady. I could not make the excellent Tompkins and the respectable Hewet understand what I can but hint. Madame was very ill when I saw her, and soon after I was told that she had lost her

head. May I ask Mademoiselle, doubtless constantly with Madame, simply to remind her of certain papers I have left with her, and to see them placed in safety."

"Stay," said Alphonsine, as he was making his final and most beautiful bow. "Are you Cesare?"

"Cesare Morandi, at your service."

"The papers were in a pocket-book, and Mrs. Eden's fate is in them!"

The man was startled; either Mrs. Eden had taken Mademoiselle Gautier into her confidence, or the papers had been left about and read. Still the eagerness which she could not quite control warned him to be prudent.

"Mademoiselle will excuse my discussing the business."

"Ah! Well, Monsieur Cesare Morandi, I will give your message; and, as I know how important it is to arrange that Versoix business, I will imitate your prudence."

As she experimentally dropped the name she watched the courier. Ah! she was right. Her shot told as she knew by ever

so slight a change in his face; but Morandi suddenly mistrusted her, and became stolid. "Monsieur," she asked indifferently, "does Mrs. Eden know your address, should she wish to communicate with you?"

"For that my address is no secret. At Domo d'Ossola every one knows me and my heritage—a charming property. I have the honour to wish Mademoiselle adieu, and to recommend to her caution. Will she kindly say to Madame Eden that only actual necessity to be present at my harvest work takes me from her side at such a moment."

"So," thought Alphonsine, when he had gone, "more riddles, but they will help each other's solution! And I troubled myself to make dreams of generosity when that noble lady on her pinnacle conceals the right and consciously defrauds her 'Lullin annuitants,' as Mr. Ravenscroft calls them! I must be near discovery of this scandal, 'ma chi va piano va sano.' My pity for her, however, is conveniently lessened. Yet, poor soul, who would have done other-

wise. Evidently it is the energy of fear, and not of confidence, that is restoring her. Surely not love of that poor hero, Sir Ernest."

Mademoiselle Gautier henceforth strung her powers to yet higher tension in watch of Mrs. Eden and of herself. To know what was in that pocket-book was an immediate necessity, but "tout vient à qui sait attendre," she reminded herself. She felt sure that Mrs. Eden had carefully put it away after reading whatever papers were in it. How else was it that it was not anywhere about the apartment, as Alphonsine soon ascertained? She grew keen and fierce in her resolution to succeed. The kindly and even grateful feelings she had had towards her hostess changed when she thought that Elizabeth wilfully kept back evidence that would affect her wealth. It was becoming a duel of wits. So much the worse for the weakest she thought.

And it was curious how circumstances kept her, as it were, in the front of the battle. The doctors thought her presence

useful. Mrs. Eden had urged her to stay at least until other friends could be admitted. Then she—poor Elizabeth! meant largely, but delicately, to repay her for her lost time, and to assist her as might be.

And Sir Ernest Harlay.

Sir Ernest Harlay was an anxiety to Mademoiselle Gautier. She did not understand him. One way and another she had seen a great deal of him in the past fortnight. He had been sincerely eager to rouse in her those sentiments which could alone as he believed save her soul whether in this world or the next.

Characters such as his bear trial and excitement badly. They lose balance, and often do the least likely things. The rector had very truly said that Ernest's courtship of Mrs. Eden would have prospered better if she had not been rich. The imminent ruin that threatened him increased the fever of his thoughts, and his conscience tormented itself by inquiries how far that fact had spurred his affection.

The rector's hints stung him by their worldly selfishness, and further disturbed his sickly honour and wavering sense. He fastened on the conversion of the infidel governess as a sort of offering to his duties, and during the anxious days of Mrs. Eden's illness he threw himself into it, and made it an occupation for his restless spirit. No harm might have come of his pastorship, for he was thoroughly sincere, if he had not found in Alphonsine a sheep that was thoroughly insincere in her dallying with his evangel.

Sir Ernest had told his uncle that he might not return for some days to Edenhurst, partly because he wished to avoid the rectory, and partly because he had some vague thought of keeping away until Mrs. Eden could with safety see him, but having missed his appointment with the timber merchant who had sent an excuse, he found Harlay Abbot intolerably lonely, and so evening found him again inquiring for Elizabeth.

Mademoiselle Gautier had been com-

pleting a descriptive list of the pictures for which Mrs. Eden had expressed a wish. She was in the drawing-room when Ernest came in, as he often did by the door that opened on the terrace, to hear from her the last report of her patient.

Her thoughts, since Cesare's talk, had made her impatient of the comedy she had acted as Ernest Harlay's catechumen. She felt that she could no longer afford delays and compromises. Her position, if she could not define it, soon might define itself to her discomfiture by some inconvenient accident.

So, when he asked her how she had liked a certain book which he had lent her, and which lay on one of the drawing-room tables, she said, raising her soft eyes to his with an expression he had not seen in them before, "You have meant to be very good to me, Sir Ernest, but these thoughts do not readily take root in my heart. Is it my fault, or do you find others more easily impressed?"

"It has not happened to me to meet

any one—in England," and Ernest hesitated.

"Who was so unfeminine a sceptic—who had so obdurate a soul," added Alphonsine quickly. "Sir Ernest do not try any more."

"Why not? Once before I passed such a one as you by on the other side, and it has been a remorse to me ever since."

"Shall I tell you why you should not try any more to help me?" she said, and there was an appeal in her madonna face which stirred him, and made him very attentive to the words she said. But her words fell far short of the meaning of the tender, concentrated look with which she seemed to draw him to her. And while he listened under the influence of its attraction, her words even seemed to grow distant and unreal. Alphonsine standing by the massed flowers of a *jardinière*, and within their atmosphere of heavy night fragrance, dressed in white stuff that fell in simple folds, wearing no ornament but a tea-rose, was very fair in the half light.

"You should not try," she went on softly, "because it might lead you into foolish and purposeless relations with me. We cannot be friends, Sir Ernest. It is I who am brave to tell you so. Not that I am of those who think such friendships always impossible, but between you and me it cannot be!"

Sir Ernest, half offended, half fascinated, as such ascetic souls can be, would have interrupted, but again, letting her deep eyes rest one moment on his, with a slight gesture of her hand she went on.

"Circumstances have been strange for us in this fortnight, and I have learnt much from you. You made me examine my heart and thoughts, you deepened my existence. Watching by a sick bed has given me time for meditation. I have fairly tried to follow your heavenward flights, but my heaven is not yours."

Sir Ernest suddenly turned from her and walked to the other end of the room and back, frowning heavily and pulling at his moustache.

"You have your heaven on earth all arranged for you, Sir Ernest, "in your marriage with Mrs. Eden, and she can share your other world as well."

"Has Mrs. Eden spoken to you of this?" asked Sir Ernest rather hoarsely, his eyes fixed on the ground.

"No, but I see, and so Sir Ernest you must not try to serve me any more. Hagar must go into her desert, whatever thirst she suffer."

"Whatever my relations with Mrs. Eden," said Sir Ernest, "that should not hinder my work."

He spoke in a low voice; the knowledge was coming on him that this was not the work he meant to have done, that he had got into Bypath meadow and was out of the highway, and yet for the life of him he could not struggle back.

"So good-bye, my friend," said Mademoiselle Gautier, as if he had not spoken.

He stood in dull pain and bewilderment. In intention he had been entirely faithful to his "work," and yet, what had happened

he did not know, but he did know how the light in those serene eyes drew him to its source. "Good-bye," repeated Alphonsine, then stopping as she passed, she lightly kissed his hand, which grasped the back of a chair, and was gone.

And never a word of Elizabeth's health had she told him, but he did not think of that just then. He stood for a minute staring at his hand, and then with a profound sigh he awoke as from a dream, but it was a dream that haunted him, and it was not on Elizabeth's side of the house that he paced up and down smoking, nor did he look for the light in her room.

Recovery from typhoid fever is tedious even when the case is favourable as was Mrs. Eden's. Even more than in typhus precautions have to be maintained against treacherous relapses and lesions of vital organs. Sometimes a moral and mental weakness, and even perversity shows itself more or less, for the nerves suffer largely, and so self-control and the power of the will is lessened. Therefore, ten more days

of convalescence were passed by Mrs. Eden before her doctors would let her see unaccustomed faces or leave her room. She was too weak to be other than quiescent at first, nor had her interest in the outer world revived with any keenness. While the fever had been on her she was eager and hopeful, but it left her very low.

Still when ten days had gone by without drawback she had regained much of her natural self. And on the tenth the fatigue of her dressing being over, she lay on a sofa in her sitting-room. The keen light in her grey eyes was very living, and its brilliance was increased by the pink flush of her cheeks. She was very lovely, but some of the serene calm and mistressship had gone from her beauty.

Mademoiselle Gautier had been during these ten days a charming and discreet companion. She had cherished without fatiguing the renascent intellect, cheering but not exhausting the tottering soul and body. No mere nurse could have done as well, for Alphonsine had both

talent and culture. During her first languors of recovery Mrs. Eden had not spoken at all of Sir Ernest Harlay. She was careful of the subject, and would not utter his name till sure of her power to speak rightly of him.

It amused her that morning to send for the cards of inquiry that had been left. She started slightly to see on one the name of Mr. Dene of Dene, her friend of the Mer de Glace, but he seemed to belong to a former condition of life, and she gave but a second's "wonder if he is come back to stay at Dene." There was but one card of Ernest's. She knew how feeble she was by the rising lump in her throat at the mere sight of his name.

Mademoiselle Gautier watched her curiously. She had not any true notion of Elizabeth's love for the man who to her seemed almost contemptible in his narrow pietism, even while she felt a sort of attraction to him.

"Has Sir Ernest Harlay been here lately?" Mrs. Eden asked, with attempted indifference.

"Not for some days; he came when you were first ill every day, sometimes twice a day."

Mrs. Eden leant back and gave herself to the sweetness of reminiscences that rushed on her, and to the yet quicker delight of anticipation. After a pause of reverie, she said,—

"I might have seen him to-day. Do you know why he has not been here lately, he is not ill?"

"I do not think he is ill. He stayed some nights I know at the village inn. Shall I send there and inquire?"

"Yes, wherever he is I should like to thank him for his inquiries. One of the men could ride over to Harlay Abbot. They are afraid of me at the rectory I am sure, or I could see some of them; but not just yet I think. Arrange for me please—you know."

So Mademoiselle Gautier wrote to Ernest Harlay.

"Mrs. Eden is sufficiently recovered to see you. Please come without delay; n'avais-je pas archi-raison?"

The note was despatched, while Mrs. Eden leant back with closed eyes in a dream of anticipation. She was unconscious that Alphonsine, putting down her work, had leant forward and was looking earnestly at her.

"What am I to imagine?" she thought; "are all my fancies wrong; are these papers in truth unimportant? Can she so act, and even wish to see Sir Ernest, knowing that she has but a doubtful fortune to give him after all. I must needs be wrong in my hopes." The passionate clenching of her fingers scarred the pink palms of her hands. "Can I not win her full confidence as she lies there in her soft weak-heartedness? Yet she must be stronger than I am to play such a part, or else I am an infatuated, sanguine fool, and little mother is right! Voyons!"

"Sir Ernest will doubtless be here this evening if he is at home. He was the most anxious of all who inquired."

"Then I was not altogether put in quarantine? People did come."

"As far as I know all the neighbours came

in masses. You will have to employ me, chère madame, as secretary to write your thanks, and then my time for leaving you will have arrived. What shall I say of your kindness to a stranger?"

"You are not a stranger now. I shall call you Alphonsine, may I not? You have been very good to me, and I look on you as a proved friend."

"Ah madame! I am one of those who think the name of friend should not be carelessly used. A friend implies confidence to which I have no claim, and a devotion that I have but insufficiently proved."

"I can't follow those subtleties," said Mrs. Eden, smiling in contented optimism; "I suppose nothing is perfect, but you have anyhow shown me devotion that no one else has."

"Force of events, madame."

"Don't interrupt me—and I have somehow confidence in you; so whether you like or not, I claim you as friend. Any other way I should be uncomfortable."

"Why, have you trust in me? After all you know me very little. It is I who have studied you and know you, madame."

"Very likely! For the rest, life is too short to mistrust those who have gone out of their way to serve you. I knew through all the fever how you took care of me, and I accept it all, but only if I may be your friend. So now tell me if I can help you and how."

"So this is her notion, to pay her way out of obligation," thought Alphonsine. "How hard and egotistic these rich people are, and shallow in their estimates!"

"See, madame," she said, and she drew her chair near the sofa and softly stroked her patient's hand, which lay transparent and sensitive. "I only ask one thing from you, your trust. Almost against my will I cannot but like you, I wish to serve you. Who knows how such things happen? I might some day serve you."

"What trust can I show you, my good Alphonsine?" said Elizabeth, still languidly smiling in her happy expectation, and not

very attentively listening to Mademoiselle Gautier's hurried and earnest words. "I am not a girl with secrets you know, and I have all my life refrained from autobiography, but whatever you like to speak of I will speak of to you."

"It is unlike most people to have no secrets," said Mademoiselle Gautier, who for a moment had felt, that were trust reposed in her she would not betray it. "I did not indeed think you would confide any to me. I should like to speak of many things to you, your youth, your education, your life here."

"But all that is in the past," said Mrs. Eden; "let us rather talk of your future. Tell me of your people, and what you mean to do, and why you engaged yourself as a governess, for which certainly you are not made. My life is perfectly level, every one in the village knows everything I do, even if I eat mustard with mutton or not. There never have been any startling events for me, except—" and she suddenly recalled Mr. Eden's death.

"Except—" repeated Mademoiselle Gautier.

"My husband's sudden end."

"Why was it, had he had illness before? Was it a sudden shock?"

"I cannot say. There was a letter, some Swiss business by the way, and, I forgot, you are from Geneva. Perhaps you know the people?"

Alphonsine put aside Mrs. Eden's indolent questions, till at last having explained her grievance Elizabeth said,—

"Do you think these Lullin annuitants have any meaning in their threats?"

"How can I tell, madame. But what is your own opinion?"

"Only the meaning of extortion. Forgive me if they are friends of yours. I wanted Mr. Ravenscroft to cut short all correspondence, and leave them to the law to deal with them if indeed it were mere extortion."

"If indeed it were mere extortion," Mademoiselle Gautier repeated.

"I hate all such *chantage*," went on

Mrs. Eden; "I believe there is something that will not bear looking into, and that I cannot suffer in my affairs."

"Doubtless it is not desirable," said Alphonsine quickly, for Mrs. Eden had flushed, and was talking hotly and fast.

"So," she said, "I shall insist on seeing the answer to Mr. Ravenscroft's letter, and if it is unsatisfactory I will shake off the claim altogether. I will have no compromises, but mademoiselle, why should I pester you with contemptible affairs such as this, unless indeed as part of the 'trust' I am to place in you. Do you know these people much?"

"A little. They are good small bourgeois, not worth your quickening your pulse about. Why should you feel vexed about such a trifle?"

"Why indeed," said Mrs. Eden, sinking back on her pillows and half smiling at her outburst, "but I do not choose to be menaced."

"But what are the menaces?"

"I have never clearly made out. I

don't know why I think of it at all, except that I have somehow connected these Lullin annuitants with my husband's death."

"I know they are poor. That makes them perhaps importunate."

"Don't speak more of them; Mr. Ravenscroft will deal with them. For the rest they cannot seriously affect even an hour's comfort of mine. So leave them to law and lawyers, and let us talk of more important things—what I can do to help you, for instance."

"Ah madame! in life who can say what is important? you know the story of S. Alexis, who sat a beggar unknown at his father's gate. Be good to these Genevese."

Had she been quite in her full health, Mrs. Eden would have responded to the appeal; for her generosity was seldom invoked in vain, but as it was she was irritable, and a certain weight in Mademoiselle Gautier's manner vexed her.

"I am tired," she said; "I think I will rest." She felt repelled by Alphonsine's

reception of her offer of good will. It is at the best, hard for the rich and prosperous to be considerate, and there was slight overbearingness in her dismissal of her friend.

In truth she yearned for quiet dreams of Ernest's coming.

As it happened, the pocket-book committed to her safe keeping by Cesare lay on the table, while Mrs. Eden had harshly discussed the "Lullin annuitants." Within it were their title-deeds to Edenhurst. It had been found when Mrs. Eden's bed had been thoroughly renovated, and brought in by the housemaids pell-mell with other books to the sitting-room. Elizabeth had clean forgotten all about it, and though Mademoiselle Gautier's eye had rested on it, it never occurred to her, that papers of which the courier had so spoken—papers she so ardently longed to examine—could be left carelessly about. She went to her room with a hardened purpose to succeed, and to listen no more to the fantastic follies of her heart.

The hours passed deliciously for Mrs. Eden. Everything was harmonious that still September day. She ate the slight meal allowed to her with vast enjoyment, and when the time came that might bring Sir Ernest, or at least news of him, she rang for Tompkins and changed her elaborate morning gown for a more elaborate one, and had her shining hair newly arranged, and let the smile of conscious happiness flood her face. She had no manner of doubt of Ernest. She was quite sure that he loved her as generously and with the same trust as she loved him. She had a great confidence in his religion, which she took as a pledge of all noblest qualities. He was to her Sir Bors and Sir Percival in one, and that he had seen the city of Sarras gave him almost infallibility in her sight. For she heartily honoured the Labarum, and credited those who fought under it with the character they ought to have. To think that Ernest the enthusiast, Ernest the Puritan, champion of faith in a faithless generation, could be other

than loyal would have seemed a wickedness in herself. She had never personally known the ardours of spiritual devotion, but love had taught her to venerate her lover's other-worldliness, and she bowed herself with reverence in his temple. As soon could she doubt his honour and faith as "truth to be a liar." She shrank with a shiver from her old maxim "*que sais-je*." Some assurance of hope, some object of faith, had grown necessary to her. And so she anchored her heart in Ernest's anchorage.

But if love lifts us up it makes our footing unsteady. Blinding us with spray of the infinite, it unfits us for the finite conditions of daily labour. When most noble and pure, it is most paradoxical. In its happiest moments, nearest suffering, most dangerous when it dazzles by its beauty, most paralyzing to the higher qualities of character when they seem wrought to fullest exercise under its power—Love, such as Elizabeth's is a perilous crisis to the soul. It leaves its chrysalis and finds

it has wings; but trembling and tender, often mistaking false fires for the sun, never is it more in peril than when it spreads them in some passing ray by which it thinks to mount to heaven.

Elizabeth was not any the stronger-minded for her twenty-seven years, but, otherwise. Her perceptions and aspirations were keener. Culture and experience strengthened in her the rapture of devotion. She was brave, and ready to stake all that made her life in playing for this prize, as no young girl could have done, who does not know what life is and can be; and as she staked largely, so equally large was the risk to her of loss. But of this she never thought. There was on her horizon no worse cloud than that Sir Ernest should be away from home when her messenger got to Harlay Abbot.

When the afternoon was well advanced she amused herself by seeing her housekeeper, and ordering dinner to be ready in case he stayed for it.

Then Tompkins appeared, becoming ir-

repressible now that her mistress was again clothed and in her right mind, fuller of affection for Mrs. Eden, and of spite to all others than usual. Mrs. Jones forgot her science and fairly collapsed under Tompkins' innuendoes and superior knowledge of foreign parts. Tompkins was privileged as having waited on her lady since the era of short frocks, and she amused Mrs. Eden, who was quite willing to escape her nurse's learning and Alphonsine's slightly-strained agreeableness.

"What is Mademoiselle Gautier doing?" she asked, rather looking forward to the gall which rose on Tompkins' thin lips when that interloper was mentioned.

"Ah! It would be hard to say, m'm, and if I did know, my lips would be sealed sacred."

"Is it too bad to tell me?"

"I know nothing, m'm, and should be sorry to, except that Mrs. Hewet says she put three lots of writing-paper in the drawing-room and it goes directly."

"Writing notes in my behalf. Is that all that is sacredly sealed?"

"Oh, m'm, as it is your pleasure, and by your orders that the house is made into a South Kensington museum, of course we, your servants, have nothing to say, but nat'rally they cannot be responsible when strangers have the keys and the fingering of everything, even to the secret drawers of your davenport when you were asleep, m'm, in your innocent trust."

"It's all right, Tompkins.; I have no secrets."

"But others have, m'm, and I will! I will!! I will!!! tell you. Oh my dear missus!"

"Good gracious! don't get hysterical, Tompkins; I can't stand it, I'm too weak;" and Mrs. Eden felt laughter gain alarmingly on her.

"Was it by your wishes, m'm," said Tompkins, tragically lowering her voice till it sounded hollow, "that this mamzelle should spend hours—yes, hours! m'm, entertaining of Sir Ernest Harlay, her hair dressed up like a peacock, and cutting of the best roses to stick in the false plaits of it."

"That will do, Tompkins," said Mrs. Eden, with sudden stiffness, "you are talking of what you don't understand now."

"I beg your pardon, m'm?"

"You don't understand, and you're talking nonsense."

"I suppose, m'm, you thinks I am so far beneath her I can't see through her, but if they were my last words to my dear and honoured missus, they would be, Beware the snake in the grass, and Men is men." After these sentiments, Tompkins pursed her lips tightly and said no more, which was prudent, as she had certainly exceeded the licence allowed to her tongue. Still her excitement and importance so amused Mrs. Eden that she could not help saying—

"I know you have great experience, Tompkins, but now just go and ask if Sir Ernest has by chance come. I fancied I heard a horse on the gravel, or it may be the messenger."

Tompkins gone, Elizabeth looked at herself in the glass with a happy look of confident triumph. But it was a humble

and gentle triumph, not in her own possession of beauty and wealth, but in the gifts she could give Ernest.

After her day's rest she felt strong, and she suddenly thought she would surprise every one and go down to the drawing-room, and perhaps even join Sir Ernest at dinner if all went well. Going down the stairs she was dizzy and felt curiously unstable on her feet, but she held carefully by the rail, and once on level ground she got quickly across the hall. Quickly she opened the drawing-room door, for she knew she had but little reserve of strength to bear the happiness that awaited her, for she heard voices within, and surely one of them was Ernest's, though it was so low she rather felt than heard it.

There was no mistaking the meaning of the group she saw. It was a graceful group considered artistically, but it quickly altered under her eye. Yet even after its alteration it was not less full of meaning for her.

CHAPTER VI.

Sir Ernest had been holding Alphonsine's hand, and he looked at her with a passionate misery that could not be suppressed at once, even by a stronger will and more practised lover than he was. He knew himself when he met Mademoiselle Gautier in the hall a fool and a ruined man, disloyal to Elizabeth, and yet he could not shake off the spell that was on him as Alphonsine silently took his hand, and still holding it led him into the drawing-room. He had stayed away all these days, resolving to do right whatever came of it, but ever harassed by doubts of what was right, and meshed in Puritan casuistry.

Unreasonable, inferior as his feeling for Alphonsine was, it blotted out, when he let it rise in him, his regard for Mrs. Eden,

as gas can blot out the stars. And Sir Ernest had in truth a double nature often at war with itself. It helped to justify to himself his fanatical self-repression. He believed his doubleness to result from the almost sensible strife of good and evil powers. He was half proud of it as witnessing to his spiritual life, and particularly proud when he achieved in respect of it a conscious humility.

So he was not as surprised as he ought to have been when his resolutions to avoid Mademoiselle Gautier, to keep away from Edenhurst until Mrs. Eden could see him, to judge justly and honourably of his right to burden her with his debts and difficulties, were forgotten in the five minutes which Alphonsine used with all her subtle power of attraction. Since she had kissed his hand in their last interview he had been too honest to hide from himself that she was an impossible convert.

She liked him passably, but she would probably not have interfered with him that day if Mrs. Eden had not been so serenely hard in her prosperity. Whether Eliza-

beth "left the Lullin annuitants to their law" or not she should make sure of Ernest.

And if that mischief were to be stopped it must be stopped at once. Mademoiselle Gautier was angry, her brain worked too ingeniously. Since morning she imagined that Mrs. Eden's duplicity had for its end to retain Ernest Harlay's love. How otherwise account for that proud woman's stooping to the comedy she had acted about Cesare's papers?

But at least she could rouse a conflict in Ernest which should make him constrained in the interview he might have with Mrs. Eden. She seemed to herself almost kind as she said to him, "Be true to your true self to-day, and so you only can be true to others—and whatever your creed, that at least you are bound to be."

He listened to her as he stood there, ashamed to know that her wishes, and not Elizabeth's, were potent with him, ashamed that he could not loose her hand or nerve his will to break with her spells. He was spurred by her words to be true. But

what was truth just then? If he could only be a little better or a little worse! As it was he was a strange mixture of honourable feeling and disloyal paltering. He had a morbid dread of being unworthily influenced by Mrs. Eden's wealth, yet Alphonsine could keep him in unworthy hesitation. He hankered in his arrogant zeal to serve her soul, yet he was careless of the injury he might inflict on Mrs. Eden's heart. Elizabeth bore the penalty of being too highly rated, for Sir Ernest thought her balance and strength would keep her safe from suffering whatever happened to him, perhaps indeed all the safer for his laches.

There is no limit to the insincerities of a conscience habitually over stimulated, and that believes it is guided in some special way, or to the cruelty of a heart that excuses its hardness by profession of extraordinary rectitude.

Unconsciously Mrs. Eden had to a certain degree been affected by the vulgar hints of Tompkins. They had quickened her perception of the relations between

her guests. If they had not turned with startled and flushed faces when she came in she might have thought them drawn together in a common interest for her.

But Sir Ernest could not dissemble, and Alphonsine knew that the comedy of her visit at Edenhurst was played out. When the first surprise was over she stood quietly near Sir Ernest, watchful and entirely unabashed. Race told in her, and there was no *soubrette* fidget or quarrelsomeness about her. Ernest was to a certain degree relieved by her good manner, and she half excused his double-heartedness by her beauty and bearing. He was friendless, poor and a stranger in the face of Mrs. Eden, and a movement of wrong-headed fairness kept him doggedly by her side.

And Elizabeth, when she saw her guests standing together as if they were playing a *tableau vivant* after M. Millais' Huguenot farewell, felt a sudden stoppage of her heart, and she would have fallen but for the overcoming will that held her straight and firm where she stood. For a second all her thoughts were confused. Her

castle of faith and hope and love was struck into ruin, and she was stunned. She looked wistfully at Ernest's face, but in its downcast frown there was conscious disloyalty, and in Mademoiselle Gautier's serenity, conscious success.

Mrs. Eden was painfully weak in body. She knew not what she might say or do, and in her sudden and intense loneliness confronting the others, an almost piteous look of entreaty came into her face. But who was there to be entreated? She did not know, only it was clear that the world was broken up for her. It seemed hours before she could frame a sentence, and in those seeming hours there was a great change in her character. A loathing seized her for her summer's dream of love, a physical sickness beset her, and she turned so ashy pale that Mademoiselle Gautier ran to her fearing she would fall. With a strong effort Mrs. Eden put her by, and walked to her usual arm-chair and sat down, still silent.

Had Sir Ernest been better used to play such a part as his that afternoon he would

have invented a happy lie, left it to work, and ridden away till smoother weather. As it was he stood irresolute, wishing to explain what never could be explained, and longing to atone for what was for ever inexcusable. Looking at his uneasiness with pitiful and yet most angry eyes, jealousy grew in Elizabeth, until its pain was hard to bear with the calm that must be maintained in her house and in such circumstances.

Mademoiselle Gautier waited. Dared to stay in the room! no thoughts were hard enough for her, the intriguing, deceitful stranger! but what words were possible? Would no one speak! In the silence it occurred to Mrs. Eden to leave the room, but she doubted her physical strength, and she could not deny herself all possible knowledge of this thing that had befallen her.

Not a month since Ernest Harlay had fooled her with pretended love, and had let her reveal hers. At last Mademoiselle Gautier spoke softly, and with a hint of sarcasm, for the keen scorn in Mrs. Eden's eyes vexed her.

"You startled me, madame. I did not think you would be so rash."

"It was rash, unwise, yet perhaps necessary that I should receive my guests myself. Sir Ernest, you do not seem half pleased to see me, yet you were very kind in asking often after my health."

He came a step towards her, holding out his hand, but she did not offer hers. He flushed red as he looked up and into her eyes. He had played fast and loose, thought chiefly of himself, his Christian duties and social position, without rightly gauging Mrs. Eden's character. But as he saw her then he knew some at least of his reckless, heartless stupidity.

"Elizabeth—Mrs. Eden," for he hurriedly corrected himself as a slight gesture warned him not to use her Christian name, "you misunderstand—you misjudge—I will explain."

"Explain, then, Sir Ernest, but be careful."

"I tried to befriend Mademoiselle Gautier."

"The zealous missionary!"

"I had not seen her for a week."

"But absence made the heart grow fonder."

"Mrs. Eden, if I found that I had been weak, if I do not now know my heart, if I am the most contemptible fool in existence, she at least is clear from blame. She knew nothing of our engagement."

Mademoiselle Gautier drew slightly back. It was true she had not known that Sir Ernest and Mrs. Eden had actually spoken of their love.

"Your friendship throve fast," said Mrs. Eden. "Three weeks after *our* friendship was declared you found it well to stop your visits of inquiry and—sympathy."

"Mrs. Eden thinks, Sir Ernest, that I am an unworthy object for your friendship or sympathy," said Alphonsine; "she offered me hers to-day, and I rejected them, thinking her unworthy of mine."

The low, calm voice in which these words were spoken gave them if possible a fuller meaning, and yet it was a meaning that Mrs. Eden and Sir Ernest could not grasp. Mademoiselle Gautier went on:—

"If Mrs. Eden will remember the pocket-book given to her by her courier, in which in her delirium she confessed was contained her fate, she will understand that I do not value the friendship of one who fraudulently denies the rights of others whom she dismisses contemptuously as 'Lullin annuitants.'"

Still Mrs. Eden sat silently wondering what was the meaning of it all. She was shaken by many emotions, but loss of trust in Ernest Harlay left her hardened to all other change or surprise.

"Mademoiselle," she said at last, breeding and dignity coming to her aid, "I do not know by what title you interest yourself in affairs which cannot concern you, still less on what grounds you accuse me of fraud."

"On these! That you received from the courier Cesare Morandi papers useful to the claimants of this estate, and you have hidden or destroyed them, knowing their importance."

"Claimants to this estate!"

"This is assumed ignorance, madame, but it will not serve you. I should indeed

have thought you incapable of feigning but for the stolen pocket-book."

Sir Ernest moved a step forward. The insult of the words was intolerable, yet he was not the right man to interfere just then. Mademoiselle Gautier spoke gravely, and with so little offensive spite in her manner that her words carried weight. He listened painfully for Mrs. Eden's reply. The impertinence had iced her.

"I had forgotten the circumstance," she said. "I remember now that my courier did entrust to me his uncle's pocket-book just before I was finally struck down by fever. But whatever be its contents I ask you again, mademoiselle, before you leave my house, what title you have to interest yourself in my affairs?"

"This," said Alphonsine very clearly; "that my mother is the legitimate daughter of Francis Eden, and that she and I are those 'Lullin annuitants' of whom I heard Mrs. Eden's opinion to-day. Whether we are found to be the rightful owners of Edenhurst the law will decide. That, madame, is my title to interest in your affairs."

The definite assertion relieved the tension of Mrs. Eden's nerves. To be threatened with loss of property was less evil than what she had dreaded might be said. She had feared some new wound and insult connected with Ernest Harlay.

So this, then, was what Mr. Ravenscroft had vaguely scented. A contemptible attack on her property, that could of course be met as it deserved. It was certainly strange that she should have entertained a "Lullin annuitant" unawares, and strange that this unaccredited Geneva woman should have been with her during her illness, but in certain conditions of mind and body nothing surprises very much. The blow of Ernest's shallow disloyalty had made all other shocks unreal, so half as if she were dreaming, in a mechanical way Mrs. Eden said,—

"Still, if all this be so, I do not yet understand why you should accuse me of fraud. These claims can be examined, and justice will be done."

"Yes, justice shall be done, and more faithfully done than when the last Mrs. Eden, my great-grandmother, paid ten

thousand francs to suppress the truth. Not that or ten times that shall suppress it now."

"You seem better informed than I am," said Mrs. Eden, "but I wait to hear what has been my fraud."

"Do you still say, madame, that the papers brought to you by the nephew of Francis Eden's courier have no bearing on my rights?"

"I know nothing of them."

"That is false!"

"Enough insult, mademoiselle; you and Sir Ernest Harlay will excuse my retiring."

Mrs. Eden rose and slowly walked to the door. Sir Ernest did not dare to offer help, though all colour had again left her face. He did not dare to disturb the stately calm and grace as bearing her mortal wound she left the room.

Alphonsine had played her last cards. She had no proof of half of her assertions, but she had accumulated guesses, and sifted and weighed them in her acute brain until she had nearly hit the truth. The effort had almost exhausted her, healthy and

strong as she was, for her intellectual excitement and strain had been great. When Mrs. Eden had softly closed the door behind her, the nearly triumphant woman sank sobbing on a sofa.

She had spoken her convictions at a venture. If that venture proved successful a new world opened before her, from which she shrank half scared. As long as the realization of her dream seemed distant it was a fair vision, and its fulfilment simple, but now the echoes of her words frightened her. They meant so much, and they could never be unsaid. Had she not endangered if not lost all by speaking too soon and too openly. That wretched coquetting with Sir Ernest had caused the explosion. It was true that her words had told. It was evident that there was a mystery of which these English Edens were uneasily conscious. But how now should she ever know more of the papers in that pocket-book? It had been by one of those singular guesses of a brain at tightest stretch, that even as she accused Mrs. Eden she recalled, as having heard it long

ago, the name of Francis Eden's courier, and connected it with Cesare, and what she had picked up of Cesare's history. The fact was an important, all-important, link in her chain if she had but sooner hit on it. Now she had burned her vessels and was in a most hostile country, with only the more than uncertain good will of Ernest Harlay to strengthen her.

And through it all she was sorry for Elizabeth.

"What have you been saying, mademoiselle?" said Sir Ernest, almost sternly. He was not as much disturbed by her tears as many men would have been. He had helped at London meetings where there was no lack of hysteria. He had not fully comprehended the issues raised. He thought he had been the humiliated witness of a woman's quarrel, for which he had been chiefly to blame.

Alphonsine was in no patient mood. Now that her blow was struck, regret, doubt and fear were asserting themselves. She would have answered hotly, for the disapproval in his voice roused her con-

tempt for him, but a servant came in with a note to her.

It was from Mrs. Eden, saying that in half an hour a carriage would be at the door to take Mademoiselle Gautier whither she should direct. There was no message for Sir Ernest, but he felt himself equally dismissed.

Alphonsine did not use the offered carriage. Begging that her luggage might be sent to the village inn, she walked there herself. She took with her the old letters and diary which she had found in her great-grandmother's room. Sir Ernest Harlay, unhappier than a rated hound, rode slowly back to Harlay Abbot. He scorned himself, he quoted texts against himself. He thought almost entirely of himself, his mistakes and his regrets. He was so busy with himself that he did not rightly estimate the astonishing assertion of Mademoiselle Gautier's claim to Edenhurst. Her romance might or not be true. He was not thinking of that, but his position as apple of discord filled his thoughts. Presently he came to the Har-

lay Abbot woods. It was dark under the summer leaves, and he had to ride slowly. With the familiar road returned on him the nightmare of his debts and difficulties.

There need be no more scruples now about marriage with the rich Mrs. Eden. He knew her well enough to be sure that was for ever over. And he had forfeited that chance not by honourable renunciation and self-sacrifice, and in obedience to the "evangelical counsels," but because of his wretched folly and weakness.

When he ate the ill-cooked steak hastily prepared for him, and walked along the echoing passages to his ill-lighted room, he was thoroughly dejected. It had been easy to be nobly scrupulous while Mrs. Eden's love was his to accept. Now nothing could save the old estate from passing to a stranger. And further knowledge of his affairs had showed him that he could not pick and choose among purchasers. The highest bidder, were he Mr. Bradlaugh or the general of the Jesuits, must be taken, and even so there would be but a doubtful margin when all debts were paid.

That silent, and brooding, and dim summer's night Ernest Harlay's faith failed him. He could not, and did not even try to pray as was his custom. Finding sleep impossible, and dreading thought, he looked for an opiate he had sometimes used in India, and took enough of it to secure some hours' forgetfulness.

Meantime, Mrs. Eden had resolved to disbelieve Mademoiselle Gautier's assertions. She thrilled with indignation when she thought of the deception practised on her by this girl. Doubtless she was a Lullin spy, this unworthy intriguer who had snared in her nets Sir Ernest. When she saw by her bedside the chair in which Alphonsine had sat so many hours she shuddered. It was as if some reptile had left a trail there. And the creature was dangerous, and would be actively dangerous henceforth. In her still fever-weakened brain a hundred fancies haunted Mrs. Eden, and they became confused and terrible until she felt herself losing self-control. Then hastily, three times producing blotted failures, she wrote a tele-

gram begging Mr. Ravenscroft to come at once to her. Mrs. Jones answered her bell, but she connected the nurse vaguely with that other evil stranger, and the woman scared by Mrs. Eden's looks went to fetch Tompkins and Mrs. Hewet. She declared that delirium of the worse type had returned.

But when the three frightened women came into her room Mrs. Eden understood that if she were to remain a free agent, as she much needed to be just then, she must be calm and even explanatory.

"I have been agitated," she said. "Nurse, please measure me some camphor and valerian you will find in my medicine chest. Hewet, see that Mademoiselle Gautier leaves this house within the hour."

"Ah!" murmured Tompkins with a long groan of comfort, for now indeed was she sure of her mistress' sanity.

"Send this telegram please, and get a room ready for Mr. Ravenscroft. Mrs. Jones, I think I may consider myself out of your hands now. Hewet, order dinner to be ready for me in the dining-room at

half-past eight;" and so Mrs. Eden resolutely resumed her ordinary life. She meant to clear away from it all trace of her weakness. But for all her will to erase them, the events of the day had left their mark for ever. She could never be again the same, or ever forget the moment when she had believed in Ernest Harlay's love. She could not ever again be so prosperously indifferent to the struggle and suffering of life. The religious remedies for such suffering, whether to be found wanting or not, must presently be at least weighed by her. In future she could not taste, with mere intellectual curiosity, the pleasures of books and of society. She had been asleep, but trial had caught her by the throat, and without pause for thought she must rouse herself to struggle with the angel lest he prove fiend. There was no more playing at living for her.

Still very weak, these thoughts haunted her in a strange, confused way. She was afraid of her strength failing, and she so determined to be strong that she dined

eagerly though cautiously lest she should be ill and once again dependent. She was better able afterwards to judge of a man's untruth. But to her it was the breakdown of all truth. She had in her prosprous serenity been fastidiously sceptical of all that did not commend itself to her taste as beautiful and strong. By the alchemy of love, Ernest's fanaticism had seemed to her ideally beautiful and strong. He had awakened in her a faith and trust she had never before known. And now this faith and trust were fond conceits, the ungrounded growth of her middle-aged passion. She scorned herself as she walked to and fro her drawing-room, now and then pausing by the stand of flowers to pick one at random, and then angrily pull it to pieces, dropping the leaves on the floor and walking on them as she would have dropped her foolish love and trampled on it. Dim thoughts of forbearance, pity, humility and sacrifice crossed her mind, who can say whence sent? her spirit recoiled from them as duties. She had enough of religion when she thought how she had

worshipped at his shrine. He the evangelizer. He the weak betrayer of her love!

There was no question of the formal and respectable religion which she would of course always profess by Sunday observance, orthodox charity, and social respect. That was a thing apart which did not occur to her just then. But the intimate guide and controlling power which she had believed in lately—the help in time of need promised her—now in her sore need she loathed as a deceptive folly. Never again should it delude her with its mirage, she would face the future without cowardly appeal to superstition. Lately she had felt confident expectation that a zealous Christianity must issue in a noble and brave life, but she had done foolishly to leave the safe limits of "que sais je." Only one truth had she been assured of in her fond quest, that Ernest Harlay the Christian, was, because he professed higher aims than others, falser than others.

All this was unreasonable railing, but Elizabeth was not herself, and parts of

her character assumed a prominence not theirs when she was at her best. The very novelty of such experiences coming when all her forces were matured increased the war within her. Her womanly and intellectual pride had been full grown, and the blow that struck at it shook her more than a less formed character could have been shaken.

An answer to her telegram came from Mr. Ravenscroft. He could not come that night as she had hoped by the last train, but he would be at her service next morning.

The loneliness that came on her was sensibly painful. What would she not have given for the rest of a faithful look, even though no words were to be said? "Yet how much better loneliness than the companionship I have had," she thought. She fell to wondering about Mademoiselle Gautier, and how it was and why she had played so strange a part; though in truth Alphonsine had rather waited on circumstances than coerced them, and events had been stranger than her plans. So wonder-

ing but still with quite secondary interest Mrs. Eden recalled the accusation brought against her of fraud, and that reminded her of the pocket-book of which mention had been made.

She rang and ordered search to be made for it, and presently it was brought to her —a black, dirty thing on the shining salver.

CHAPTER VII.

The sight of it recalled the disgust, even to faintness, which it had caused her, and the reminiscence brought to her memory with all its details the scene blotted out by her fever. Cesare's urgent manner and evident sense of important service she remembered. Still her growing uneasiness about the contents of the greasy thing seemed absurd. Only that her housemaids were well trained, it would have been thrown away as altogether unfit for her room. Yet Mrs. Eden allowed that it was lucky it had been kept, since that insolent governess had dared to say that she, Elizabeth Eden, had hidden its contents. She to tamper with the titles of these Lullins to their annuity! No, she would not wait for Mr. Ravenscroft's

coming. The whole affair was too contemptible. I will appreciate the extent of my fraud and falsehood," she said, and her mobile lips curled in exquisite scorn.

So she untied the pocket-book, which was fastened with a new strap that Cesare had put round it. Indeed the worn edges would not otherwise have kept together. Inside secured in oiled silk were some papers, two half sheets, on which were faded writing and a slip that seemed a printed form filled up with names and dates. Mrs. Eden spread it out and read: —"Page 42, 1815, No. 83. Marriage solemnized, at the parish church of Whinfell, Yorkshire, April 13th.

"Francis Eden, 21, bachelor. Julie Lullin spinster, fathers deceased. Married in the parish church, according to the rites and ceremonies of the Church, by special licence by me, T. R. Johnstone." There followed the due signatures of bridegroom, bride and witnesses, and the declaration,—'The above is a true copy of the marriage register of the parish church of Whinfell, aforesaid extracted,

this thirteenth day of April in the year of our Lord one thousand eight hundred and sixteen, by me,

"T. R. JOHNSTONE."

"So they were married," Mrs. Eden thought vaguely; "I was wrong in that, but how do I know now what this girl is to Francis Eden and Julie Lullin?" With some curiosity, but not a very eager one, for the affairs of these people seemed to her altogether insignificant, Mrs. Eden took a magnifying lens from the table, and bringing the other papers under the light of a lamp she made out nearly all that was written on them. The first was in French, and was signed with a great flourish Morandi. It ran to this effect when translated. "In case of accident or mischance to me, these papers must be given to Giuseppe Pacini, at Vogogna, to be kept by him until my nephew Cesare Morandi be of intelligence to understand and use them as may then seem best. They became mine on the death, by drowning at Versoix, of Francis Eden, then my employer. They should be of great

value to the family of Eden, Edenhurst, Kent, England. Let this be properly calculated by my heir, in case of accident occurring to me while they are in my possession. If occasion arise, Giuseppe Pacini can act for the child." The spelling and writing were bad, and Elizabeth had not patience to get any correct idea of what was meant by all these wishes of her courier's old uncle. Whether he had a presentiment or not, soon after he had so written down his instructions he met with the accident which had paralyzed him, and left him partly though not altogether crippled in mind and body. First, however, he had gone to England, and had tested his power of extortion by a visit to old Mrs. Eden. In exchange for a letter in which Francis Eden had written to Julie as his wife, and casually mentioned the church of Whinfell and the doited clergyman who had married them, Morandi had got from the angry and frightened mother of Philip the idol, ten thousand francs. It was but an earnest of what, when Philip married and was fairly in

enjoyment of his estate, Morandi meant to ask for the more important proofs of Julie Eden's title.

The women of his family, who when he was a helpless invalid saw to his necessities,—he had no male relations but his little nephew—did not know why with all his imbecility the pocket-book was never lost sight of by the shattered courier. They concluded that it contained a charm or relic, and they managed him by it, as he became more feeble, taking it away as a punishment and restoring it to gain their ends, while he pitifully stuttered inarticulate commands and entreaties.

Certainly he did not personally profit by his speculative theft of Francis Eden's bag. It was the only article that old Lullin suffered him to appropriate, because it had on it no name, and might belong to any one, and appeared empty. Morandi himself did not know how valuable were its contents. The morning of the day her husband was drowned Julie had rearranged her few valuables, taking far greater care of her trinkets than of her marriage lines,

for her bracelets might be stolen, she calculated, but who would dispute her marriage! The little pocket-book did not fit readily into the newly-settled jewel case where she usually kept it, and for the moment she thrust it into a deep, side pocket of a bag, which shut with a good spring, before she ran out to join Francis Eden in the boat. Morandi waited with her cloak and parasol, and saw her do it. If she had not twice tried the safety of the lock he would have thought no more about the matter, but her precaution made him curious. When old Lullin summarily dismissed him with bare wages, allowing no booty or perquisites of clothes as compensation, he took the bag with a shrug. He would some day try if the Eden family might not be more liberal to him, but until he examined Julie's pocket-book he did not guess what leverage he had wherewith to work upon their fears and feelings.

Elizabeth did no more than roughly guess at the meaning of Morandi's crabbed phrases; she took the third paper, also yellow with age, and on which was faded

writing. The words were English written legibly, and in a hand so like her husband's that at first she thought it was his.

It chanced that one wet day at Fribourg, hardly a week before the accident at Versoix, Francis Eden and his wife quarrelled, whereon she had executed a scene with all details complete. He had kissed her tears away, for they lay bright on her flushed, warm cheek, and had promised her her way "to the half of my kingdom," he laughingly declared.

"I shall have no share in your kingdom, méchant. You will sell me some day at Smithfield, or you will kill me with John Bull cruelty, and your stern mother, who hates you, will encourage you to throw away your poor little wife."

"By George, you're right," said Francis, pouring out his fourth glass of Kirsch, "I believe the old soul does hate me. She only thinks of that booby Philip. I wouldn't have choused her about the marriage for any money. I'll tell you what Ju, my *nouvelle Héloise*, I'll surprise the fools yet. I'll cut them out. I'll

make my will this very day. I shan't die, you know, don't expect it. They'll be in a nice quandary when I take my bride home, and gad I think I see my virtuous parent's face, when I tell her that if she poisons me you will come in for Edenhurst!"

"But you can't do such things, little madman. There are laws, you know."

"Oh confound the laws, say I. Every Briton does what he likes with his own, so don't contradict me, baggage; fetch me the writing things."

Thus it happened that the paper now read by Elizabeth purported to be the will of Francis Eden. He was rather drunk, but not enough to spoil his writing, and indeed his dull brains were stimulated to the better carrying out of his joke. For what a joke it was that Julie Lullin should even in fancy beard his starched, grim mother in her home. "I leave everything I die possessed of to my wife, Julie Eden." "There, that will astonish them I warrant," he said, and ringing the bell with great gravity, he signed the slip of paper and

had his signature witnessed by the landlord and head waiter of his inn, the Zahringer Hof. The scrap would most likely have been rolled into matches next day if Mr. Eden in his sober senses had come across it, but Julie put it by with thrift, and so it now came into Elizabeth's hands, proving over again that truth is stranger than fiction, for first the Versoix accident, then old Morandi's break-down and Cesare's devotion, had concurred to this result.

Slowly she digested the fact, that here was more in question than the "Lullin annuity," but it was by thinking of Ernest Harlay's conduct, that any clear conception of the meaning of these papers came to her. A suspicion suddenly awoke in her, that if Mademoiselle Gautier knew what they were, Sir Ernest probably also knew, and it flashed on her that they, if genuine, meant her ruin. If Francis Eden had been legally married, why his heirs would have a right to Edenhurst, whether he had made that will or not. It only shut off all possibility of mistake. Mrs.

Eden during her girlhood at Guise Court had heard a good deal of legal talk. She recognized her possible position and prospects in this light of Ernest's disloyalty. She recognized in the same light Alphonsine's possible heiress-ship.

She recoiled from the unworthy thought, but it seemed forced on her. Her wide reading helped to check her better hopes. Were not all authorities agreed that when money and women were at stake no man was safe. Her holyday "*que sais-je*" gained a cynical reality when she thought that Ernest's affection had waned and waxed according to her and Mademoiselle Gautier's chances of wealth.

"Yet better so. He has known in time what I was worth, and I have also tested him," she thought in the bitterness of her wound. And even while she thought it a yearning came on her for one more hour of happy trust, one more look from faithful eyes, one more passionate kiss, the pledge and token of "one spirit within two frames." But never more! Then came a storm of tears and sighs that shook her

till she lay prone on a sofa turned from the light. It was a healthier mood, and she was quiet after a time. But Mrs. Hewet and Tompkins, afraid of intruding yet at their wits' end with anxiety, at last ventured to remind her that she was not sufficiently recovered to sit up so late.

She hid hastily the traces of her emotion, and told them she would go upstairs soon. When they had gone she took the papers and carefully replaced them as they were in the old pocket-book, but her hands trembled so that she could hardly hold it. A temptation assailed her at the touch of it. The words "if they were destroyed" haunted her. No after consequences presented themselves, only as she carried the pocket-book upstairs the words, "If they were destroyed" followed her with a kind of rhythmical iteration. While Tompkins helped her to undress, and Mrs. Jones arranged her medicines and laid ready all that the convalescent might want, her fingers closed tightly on the book. She peremptorily dismissed the nurse whose reign in the sick-room had indeed become

nominal some days before. Tompkins looking scared kissed her mistress's hand, and begged to be allowed to come back and "tuck her in" as in old times; but when they had gone Elizabeth locked her door and sat down before her writing-table. Leaning her head on one hand and staring at the other, in which were the papers from the dead, she tried to think out the position.

Her brain seemed helplessly filled by the one thought, "if they were destroyed." But presently reasons began to stir in it for obeying the suggestion. It seemed clear that their retention in Morandi's hands for so many years should make them inoperative. There must be limitations to such claims. The Lullins all these years had been satisfied. There was no hardship to them in maintaining things as they were. They could be largely assisted if it were shown that they were Eden connexions. It was a pressing duty to save Ernest Harlay from such degradation as a sordid marriage with this intriguing adventuress. His temptation could only be

to save his estate. And Elizabeth thought that she would henceforth set herself to use her fortune for highest and noblest purposes. She would as it were hold it in trust for good works. It should not be hers but for the poor, for every charity that could benefit others. Surely she was bound to preserve her stewardship, nor let it pass, if she could prevent it, to alien and more than doubtful hands. At last it seemed to her even a brave and praiseworthy act to check in the bud these Lullin pretensions, and so she would protect her husband and his mother's family arrangements, and their memory and Ernest.

The train of arguments passed over her brain as if they were suggested by some pleader and not of its own growth. They, at least, seemed to be spoken audibly to her by voices very far off yet in her ear. She took the pocket-book up and set her teeth as she slowly folded the papers so as to tear them into smallest pieces. Suddenly there seemed to her a sound like the rustle of silk or still more like the rapid flight of

water-fowl, as she had often heard it in Gloucestershire. An unbearable fear fell on her, and under its pressure she looked up and around. Opposite to her at the writing-table was a misty outline, which appeared the figure of a woman sitting there. As she stared stiff and speechless from oppression of her brain the thing faded away slowly, the light seemed to go out, Mrs. Eden swooned and fell to the ground, and lay there senseless. She had been the victim of a hallucination, nothing more. The strain on her weakened nerves had caused the false vision, and there was no other mystery.

The compound part played by "spirit" and "flesh," in cases like this of Mrs. Eden's, helps to bridge the chasm that was once thought to separate them. The interdependence of mind and matter is nowhere more traceable than in the states of being now isolated, now epidemic, in which the senses have suffered illusions which the will and reason have been powerless to control.

Which may or may not be. But, how-

ever clearly traceable in immediate cause to ill health of the body, not less powerful was the effect of Mrs. Eden's hallucination. One minute later she might, under the influence of semi-delirium, have destroyed the family papers in her charge, and committed a crime that would have darkened her life and changed the fortunes of many others. As it was, when she came to herself she was in a different world. Dawn was breaking. There was yet silence everywhere. Dim mists creeping by hid from sight all but the higher branches of the trees. A chilly sadness was on all things; there was neither colour or perfume, as if feeling and passion were dead. In the half-light the candles burned dimly but steadily.

For some minutes Elizabeth could not recall any of the events that had befallen her. She wondered foolishly how she came to be on the floor, and why, if she were ill, she had been left alone. But gradually she recalled the agony of the day before, and she shut her eyes as if she could shut out the remembrance. With

difficulty she got up from the ground, for she was stiffened and weak, but holding by the foot-rail of her bed she staggered away from the writing-table. The sight of the pocket-book which lay on it made her shiver. She dared not raise her eyes to the arm-chair beyond, in which the vision had sat. A great fear was on her, and she felt as if she were still liable to the sight of that tremulous, misty, blue form.

All thought of destroying the papers, all persuasive sophistries had vanished. Frightened, tired, and stupefied, she crept to bed. There seemed no spirit left in her. She was cowed, and shattered, and in sheer exhaustion she presently fell into heavy but uneasy sleep.

What would not have been to her in those hours of lonely suffering the instinct of prayer and of trust in a Divine Helper! But such instincts come by habitual culture, and for all her formal knowledge of creeds, when terror seized her there was for her no city of refuge. She stretched forth no hands into the dark, and so felt no answering touch. Yet who can say that

One had not been there keeping her, yet so as by fear, from the stress of that night's temptation.

A different night was passed by Mademoiselle Gautier. The events of the day had only roused her energies to fuller play. The cavalier manner of the people at the Eden Arms reminded her that she had much to do if she hoped to assert even provisionally her claim to Eden kinship. She could not play any longer a waiting game. Her stock of money was small, for though Mr. Harlay had paid her a quarter's salary, and her fare back to Geneva, she had sent ten pounds for her father's use. The remainder was but a widow's cruse for her campaign. However, to a gambler at heart as she was, twenty pounds contained large possibilities, only it must be speedily staked, and not wasted in a village inn on truly British beef-steaks.

Before she went to bed she wrote to Mr. Harlay, as an official person and an old friend of the family, a short narrative of her claim as her mother's representative. She dealt in bold assertion, not entering

into detail of the proofs, which indeed were not accessible to her but as she assumed in the keeping of Mrs. Eden and her lawyers. She made a copy of her letter, and resolved to take it next day to Mr. Ravenscroft. If he did not attend to her she would go on to the firm who were her mother's agents, though only so far as they transmitted half-yearly her annuity.

Some support she must enlist, or before many hours she would probably be obliged by public opinion to leave Edenhurst. She kept Sir Ernest Harlay out of her plans, first because she did not think help from him would profit her just then, but also because for all her low estimate of him she liked him, and he made a figure in her dreams of the future. Naturally she did not judge severely his susceptibility to her attraction, though she fully recognized his instability of purpose. But she liked him, and human love is "not the growth of human will." Since she had seen his face darken under Mrs. Eden's righteous anger she had liked him better. Meantime she would not have him mixed up in

her affairs while they were so doubtful. Instinctively she knew that it would not do to startle him by ways and means perhaps necessary to her, still less to trust his staunchness to her cause if question of religious obligation arose.

"I do not know," she thought, "whether it is sublime or ridiculous, but I really believe he would sacrifice Edenhurst and my love for a text."

But Alphonsine idealized him. At that moment texts had failed him. Having written her letters Mademoiselle Gautier supped with hearty appetite on bread and cheese. Knowing that coffee was unattainable and light wine a snare, while tea was but an unwholesome *tisane*, she began her career of English independence by an appropriate half-pint of "pell-ell," as with all her practice in the national speech, she still called our bitter beer.

Next day very quietly, but well dressed, she took her letter herself to the rectory gate, and saw it sent into the house. Then she went down to the railway station to meet the ten o'clock train for London.

But the down train had deposited Mr. Ravenscroft on the platform, and she crossed him on the road. Nothing could well be more savage than his temper for a well-regulated club man as he was. He bowed with vicious resolve to have as little as possible to do with any one at Edenhurst that day. He had had enough of women's folly. He had upset his breakfast hour, and broken three appointments to suit Mrs. Eden's caprice. And here was this pretentious governess bothering at an hour when coquetry should be forbidden by statute.

He would have passed on, but Mademoiselle Gautier spoke.

"You are going to Edenhurst, Mr. Ravenscroft?"

He was obliged to stop and say, "An early visit as you see. I am glad there is nothing urgent requiring me there, or you would not be here I presume; Mrs. Eden gains strength I trust."

Alphonsine turned to walk with him, and laid her hand on his arm. He looked at it with discomposure; it was a large

shapely hand, well-gloved, and perceptibly heavy.

Mademoiselle Gautier spoke with more hesitation, and in less florid English than usual. Trying to force her story on this lawyer was uphill work.

"I beg you to hear what I have to say. It is important; it will be better for Mrs. Eden that you should hear."

The tone startled Mr. Ravenscroft, still he thought he was to hear some impertinence. These ladies had quarrelled, which was natural, that was all.

"Perhaps you had as well not say it," he observed; "safer to say little, and I confess I do not see how it will be 'better for Mrs. Eden' that you should unburden yourself."

But he could not shake off this troublesome young woman, who was in an evident quandary. "My business must be attended to sooner or later," insisted Alphonsine, "I will not keep you long."

With a shrug he resigned himself, but his grizzled eyebrows drew together with a jerk when she said,—

"You questioned me about the Lullin annuitants. I am the grand-daughter of the Julie Lullin to whom the money was first given."

He did not speak for a moment. When he did his manner was iced, and rather contemptuous; he scented a plot, a sensational mystery conducted by his companion.

"Therefore your last letter has remained unanswered. I am here to claim my rights."

"Allow me to say, in a suspicious and sneaking way. But if you are in fact the authentic Lullin representative, I daresay I can settle your claim. At another time, however, I will represent your case to Mrs. Eden as favourably as these peculiar circumstances will let me."

"Ah, you talk like this! you despise my claim! It is well, but you do not know what it is; and what if my rights were fraudulently withheld! What if I had no other way but this sneaking one to assert them! Must I not endeavour to connect the broken links of my proof? It

is not I who have been as you call it sneaking."

"So there were broken links," Mr. Ravenscroft thought, but he only nodded, for Mademoiselle Gautier had for once lost her calm under the word "sneaking." She continued, "Yes, I am proud to say, I have had wit to profit by my opportunities."

"You seem to have taken in a true, good, unsuspicious friend, mademoiselle, pretending to be other than you were."

"That true, good, unsuspicious woman cheats me; if she has not destroyed she conceals the papers that would prove that. It is well for you to know it. To know that I know it before you consult together."

"Mademoiselle Gautier or Lullin, take care, such accusations can be punished when false. If I pay no attention to your words it is because I believe you either mad or the tool of others. I shall warn Mrs. Eden to receive you no more within her doors."

"It is not I who am the impostor; do

you, the confidential adviser of this family, pretend that you do not know the story of Francis Eden? Good feeling might have made you more tolerant of the madness, if it be madness, of his lineal descendant. Tolerance on my side will be henceforth impossible;" and with a slight, admirably haughty bow Alphonsine turned back.

Her insolence enraged him, he was astounded, but uneasy at her hints. He regretted that he had lost his temper, but lawyer as he was, under all the circumstances he could not help it. Certainly he had had little experience of such affairs in his "real property" business. Except in Bleak House, Chancery matters seldom take sensational forms, or are mixed up with infuriated foreigners such as this young woman.

What on earth lay behind the Lullin business? What preposterous claim was this after half a century? Mrs. Eden tamper with papers! If ever a woman was incapable she was, yet, after all, who could be quite sure of any woman?

Perplexed, cross and hungry, Mr. Ravens-

croft arrived at Edenhurst. Mrs. Eden would be down in half an hour he was told, meantime he breakfasted, and though more and more puzzled he began to judge of people and things as befits a first-rate lawyer, from a more Olympian and serene height.

During the month of Mrs. Eden's illness, clouds of debt and official letters by the dozen had accumulated at the rectory. Yet on that August morning it was at its gayest and shiniest. Olly was very "breakfasty" in crisp white clothes of which the trimmings were as she remarked "a caution." Her hair was as rough as any modern artist of the Grosvenor Gallery could wish, while the shining coils of serene Alice's head were typical of sweet and ordered calm.

The table round which the rectorial society was gathered was charming. There was just enough greenery to set off the old silver services, the black-handled coffee pot, exquisite in curve, and the *repoussé* sugar-bowl and cream-ewer.

It was not a Scotch meal, too much for

English August. There was a reminiscence of foreign travel in the claret that gave precious tone to the butter and cream, but in its low, round jug it did not suggest what we understand by wine any more than the Kedgeree and omelette meant heavy eating. There were Alpine strawberries in frosted dishes and early figs, among the purple of which gleamed sun-stained apricots.

How could the rector fail to be of his epoch, as it was there, though but in such trifles, represented. It were flat blasphemy not to suit doctrine to evidently providential progress, and foolish blindness not to see the evolution of humanity in all these refining influences.

But among them he looked worn and soured. The sneer on his face, telling when he declaimed against exhausted formulas and lifeless creeds, had deepened unpleasantly the lines from the nostril to the corner of his mouth. He had gloried in being militant, and continually slaying the dragons of customary error; but now, mixed with intellectual, was an ugly personal combativeness. He was very silent,

though two men were breakfasting, but Mrs. Harlay was perfectly mistress of that as of most social situations. She was even more *flamboyant* with trimming than was Isolda, a delicate touch of artificial colour accented her faded, shepherdess style of beauty. Soft airs and ultra refinement had always been her cue, and she managed the white hands that twinkled out of their lace ruffles, among the tea-cups very gracefully. The watch-words for the morning were "charming" and "so nice!" and "harmony descends on ravished earth" might have been effectively sung in honour of the happy day, for Rudolph Dene of Dene had dined and slept, and now was breakfasting on his way to a county meeting to which the rectory conveniently broke his ride.

CHAPTER VIII.

Mr. Dene was quite very delightful, and so too nice, most young ladies and their mothers said. Young married women did not discuss him much. A good many men abused him, though they did not know how to do it pertinently, a good many more imitated his taste. One or two curious specimens of ambitious bumpkinhood had blossomed imitatively in his neighbourhood, but Mr. Dene was as hard to copy as a head painted by a great master. Crumpets knew better than to attempt it. He had his own little style, "not gaudy, but possessed of *cachet*," he flattered himself; "quietly effective and generally suitable to the idiosyncrasy of South Saxons." "The secret of life," he used to say to the Harlay girls, "is proportion; Dene is a symphony

in six sharps. I am a little tune in the natural key. He may wear a velvet collar, and be forgiven, while I should lose caste for ever. If he likes to drive camelopards in a chariot round his grounds, the size of them excuses him. A straight waistcoat would be my portion if I ventured beyond the commonplace. So I must perfect the commonplace, which is not a bad mission, as missions go. He may tell you that you are divinely enchanting. Gross insolence in rank and file to hint the fact!"

Rudolf Dene was a very great squire indeed. His lordships and honours would have filled half a canto for Sir Walter Scott. His grandfather had refused a peerage, with scant civility to the minister who proposed to level him down to five hundred of his countrymen. The same ancestor had married a Hungarian, and the fact asserted itself in his descendants. Rudolf Dene was not of any of the usual types of Englishmen as we are used to think of them. He was neither the improving and advanced country gentleman,

or the perfect Pall Mall man, or the cultivated Crœsus. Neither was he the cosmopolitan and travelled gentleman of Tudor times. A fair musician, a nice critic of painting, and rarest of accomplishments, a judge and enthusiast in architecture, these acquirements were mere ornaments to his more solid parts. He had lived in various continental societies, and he estimated the importance to Englishmen of foreign politics correctly. The silver streak he knew to be a very unimportant barrier, deceptive and the more untrustworthy when we were to be invaded, not by regiments, but by ideas, and attacked in our outlying dependencies by alternate flattery and fright.

He refused and was careful to refuse the influences of "public opinion." He avoided cant abstractions and generalities in his speech. Men as men, and not as masses even of the divine Humanity that is to be, interested him. Believing, as he did, that one man can alter the relations of men to an illimitable extent, his conception of the worth and dignity of individuals was higher than is now usual. It was not

exactly pride or egotism which made him think highly of his own gifts and cultivate them carefully. He belonged to the elder worthies who knew themselves Lords of the universe, and not mere items of it. If he reckoned the will, the inalienable title of man's quasi-divinity, it was an extreme, not useless in a mechanical generation when laws seem likely to override Law, when we may say of our teachers that they bind us in a Necessity more enslaving than ever before fettered freedom. To sum up Mr. Dene's divergencies from the British temper, as it exists after three centuries of Protestantism, he was a Catholic. The Denes of Dene had never wavered in loyalty to the ancient faith. His Hungarian mother had renewed the vitality that long suppression had somewhat deadened in its English confessors, and from his foreign relations Rudolf had acquired a truer Catholicism of thought than might have been his portion had all his interests been insular. Mr. Dene was a shade more showy in his riding and shooting than model Englishmen. He chose to be grace-

ful in spite of the British world, and this was a chief fault found with him by his neighbours. But Raleigh and Sidney would not have blamed him. The shape of his hand and foot was also unpatriotic. His instep was excessively arched, his lithe and sinewy hand had not modern solidity, but was well fitted to handle one of those swords which we are told prove the slightness of mediæval knights.

Mr. Dene was grave and rather slow of speech. He could be sarcastic, but he never chaffed, though if a slang word suited his meaning better than another he was no pedant. As for the phraseology that is largely used as padding for light literature and by popular speakers he seldom fell into its slip-slop. He despised the ignorant chauvinism that threatens to make up by boasting for what is deficient in English manners and character and conduct. Sixty years since he might have been a working man in public life as far as the disabilities of his creed permitted. As it was he would not endure the heat and sawdust of the arena even if it had been

open to him, and he had too cynically scorned success. He found fault with other men's motes, and had perhaps, not sufficiently perceived his own neglect of duties for which, by his great wealth, he had been generously paid in advance.

Meantime as he was well dressed, well bred, and rich, his faults were not readily discovered, nor were the Harlays of the rectory likely to look for them, though the rector would have preferred a Brahmin to a Romanist as son-in-law.

"Has Mrs. Eden become visible yet?" he asked, apropos to the adventures at Harlay Abbot of which of course he was told.

"Not to any of us," said Mrs. Harlay. "I heard that Ernest was admitted yesterday."

"I met her by accident in Savoie. Mr. Eden rather avoided the wicked world, didn't he?"

"Well yes, I suppose he did. He didn't care for hunting or for London. Charming as she is she is certainly unsocial, she does no more than tolerate us. Even at

Rome she chose odd people for her friends."

"Surprising fogies the De Kerhuon set," observed Olly.

"De Kerhuons! Yes. I know them. I feel myself also a fogy."

"I'm certain," continued Isolda, "that though you know most people you don't know the frisky Skeggs of Utopia City, Miss."

"You are wrong, Miss Harlay, I have ridden home across the Campagna from Veii with the distinguished Erminia. She did me the honour to tell me that I looked very fit, but she didn't think I could stay if it came to racing an American of the real grit."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Olly, "that's pure English, not a bit Yankee."

"Probably you had mutually enriched each other's repertory."

"I assure you these people and their extraordinary language is not at all to my taste," said Mrs. Harlay emphatically, "but my darling Olly is enthusiastic."

"Oh, I don't go in for all Erminia Skeggs'

talk," said Olly. "It knocked you silly, at the same time she declared it was a revival of old English dialects and idioms."

"Hardly survival of the fittest though," said Mr. Dene. "So Ernest Harlay is received the first of her neighbours by Mrs. Eden?"

"Case of funeral baked meats," suggested Crumpets. But no one smiled at his remark. The Harlays were too anxious for the marriage to risk untimely jokes. Mr. Dene surveyed him slowly. The great squire liked Sir Ernest; he was interested in the Puritan as a social phenomenon, seeing that his Puritan tinge was ingrained and not assumed in modern dissatisfaction and restlessness. If there were a spark of Cromwell's fire in him it was not kindled by Mr. Carlyle and his disciples.

"There was a young Swiss lady of your party at Harlay Abbot, was there not?" asked Mr. Dene.

"Mademoiselle Gautier our governess, but not after that day. It was through her forwardness, poor dear Mrs. Eden caught this fearful fever."

"Give her the benefit of the fact that she has been helping to nurse Mrs. Eden ever since," observed the rector.

"And she is very good-looking, another creditable fact," said Crumpets.

"Do you think so? I thought there was something vulgar and coarse about her. She is certainly showy, but bad style," said Mrs. Harlay.

"You didn't think so at first," remarked Olly, in her lower voice.

"Second thoughts were truest," answered her mother. "I confess when I found out her disposition, her want of truth, and even decent consideration for her employers, I no longer saw through rosy spectacles. I am always easily taken in at first by my feelings."

"Well," said Crumpets, "my man came up from the Eden Arms this morning, and he says Mademoiselle Gautier has been turned out of Edenhurst. She put up in the village last night."

Here was exciting news. Audrey jerked her tea-cup off the table, but nobody picked it up.

"Dearest Mrs. Eden! I knew her good sense would triumph. I was sure the bubble would burst," exclaimed Mrs. Harlay.

"Ernest is in the row," observed Audrey.

"Are you sure it isn't a shave?" asked Isolda.

"Poor thing, I suppose it wouldn't do to go and see her," said the soft Alice.

"I don't know why you are all cackling over such a natural event," observed Mr. Harlay. "Women's friendships are not distinguished for endurance."

"And most likely you are all wrong," said Mr. Dene. "The ladies in question are not of the fighting sort. I am sure Mrs. Eden is not, at least in any private quarrel."

"My man had it from an Edenhurst servant that there has been a stiffish breeze," said Crumpets.

"I will sacrifice everything and go to my dear Mrs. Eden at once," declared Mrs. Harlay, "we are all involved in the affair. We introduced this person too well."

"Let me intercede," said Crumpets; "no one's guilty, you know, till it's proved."

"Silly man," simpered the rector's wife, "Ah que les hommes sont bêtes. There was something odd about her. A providential instinct led me to separate my children from her."

"But honestly," said Mr. Dene, "why are you down on her? Has she done anything out of the ordinary feminine line."

"That depends on where you draw the line. Some things are better not discussed, but my intuitions seldom mislead me."

Olly had been thinking. Her father had trusted her with some of his hopes and fears, and she knew that he built on Ernest's marriage to Mrs. Eden. She remembered that her cousin had been the evening before at Edenhurst. "The child" was right. Mademoiselle Gautier's disgrace had probably to do with Ernest. It looked bad. She had guessed Ernest's entanglement, and she had not worldly experience or judgment enough with all her knowledge to judge him fairly.

"I think you have been taking a course of Wilkie Collins," observed Mr. Dene. "You hint thrilling mysteries. I assure

you the way you shook your head just now was harrowing. Is there a mystery? By-the-bye," he said, pausing suddenly, "she is Genevese, is she not, your ex-governess? Where did you find her at Geneva?"

"In a pasteur's pocket," said Isolda. "Of course everything was safe and to be believed that he chose to tell us, a successor of St. Calvin."

"I was so disconcerted by the loss of our dear old friend Miss Fazackerly, and in such a hurry," interposed Mrs. Harlay, "that I was rash. She seemed so nice too. But pray let us talk of pleasant subjects. I wash my hands of Mademoiselle Gautier, and I have only now to go in dust and ashes to Edenhurst, apologizing that I brought her into our nest."

"If she is the lady I saw yesterday when I called at Edenhurst I think I have seen her at Geneva—Chénevière's, the curiosity dealer. She showed me some Moorish *faïence* I remember. I did not think of it till you suggested some queer past."

"That must be a mistake, Mr. Dene," said Mrs. Harlay, stiffening with horror.

"She could not have been a shop girl. She is a first-rate musician, and has only too attractive manners."

"I daresay I'm wrong, but you know all that is compatible with helping her father to sell his art objects."

"Art objects!" said Alice, "that is how she knew so much about them then."

Blank dismay chilled Mrs. Harlay's heart. What was this thing that she had warmed, and fed, and praised to her friends!

"Mr. Harlay," she said with pathos, "can't she be punished as an impostor?"

Mr. Dene relieved the oppression of the company by explaining that perhaps for national reasons the English were more sensitive to the imputation of shop-keeping than other people. "Mademoiselle Gautier in fact, derogated from her position when she left her home for yours. But I must be all wrong. Chénevière were the *bric à brac* merchants I mean, not Gautier."

"Bach and Beethoven indeed!" said Mrs. Harlay irrelevantly, and unequal to follow Mr. Dene's observations. "Christopher,

you must do something. Am I to meet this person in the village?"

"My dear, wait and hear what Mrs. Eden says."

"My poor Mrs. Eden!" said Mrs. Harlay mournfully, and then she made up her face for cheerful and sociable smiles, as if she shook off the very memory of such low persons and unseemly situations. She was getting up to leave the breakfast table when a letter was brought to the rector. Just as he unfolded it—for "immediate" was written on the envelope—his wife passed behind his chair.

"From her! a letter! she has the insolence to write!"

"Let us sit in judgment," said Crumpets; "what does she say?"

"Ah, Christopher," said his wife, whose countenance and manner were still framed for cheerful gaiety, "your pastoral feelings make you too kind. I fear you have encouraged her, sir."

But her face and her innocent mirth collapsed as the first sentence of the letter forced its meaning on her.

"Reverend Sir—

"I call on you to see justice done and to assist me in declaring my mother's claims. Edenhurst is hers by right."

Alphonsine had begun by no preamble, she meant that at all events her letter should be read.

Mrs. Harlay had taken the paper out of her husband's hand. She turned to the signature,—"Alphonsine Chénevière Gautier."

"The woman's mad," she said, with a forced little laugh: though she had no real idea of the meaning of what she read, she felt it was something extraordinary.

"I am the grand-daughter of Francis Eden, your father's schoolfellow. Do not let my silence hitherto prejudice you against me. The course I have taken seemed to me necessary. Formal means were inadequate to complete the evidence already held by my family. Circumstances have hitherto favoured me in my endeavour personally to connect the links which prove our title, and to refute the lies by which we have been disinherited. Your sacred

office obliges you to further justice towards those defrauded of their rights. I beg you to hear what I can say to you in support of my claim. Should you be convinced that it is just, I rely on your powerful support."

"It's like a letter to the *Times*," said Crumpets.

Mrs. Harlay had read straight through it mechanically. The rector was bewildered. It is difficult to conceive at once such a novelty, or to measure a claim by which, if it be successful, the whole neighbourhood will be upset and its institutions revolutionized.

"She is mad," he repeated feebly, "but it's quite true that Francis Eden who was drowned near Geneva was at school with my father."

"By Jove! how did she get hold of that?" exclaimed Crumpets, who, in the silence of the others, felt it incumbent on him to be chorus.

"You must have her shut up," said Mrs. Harlay, clinging to the insane hypothesis, and still incapable of taking seriously the assertions of her ex-governess.

Mr. Dene had borrowed the letter and was reading it attentively. He folded it up with a grave face and asked :—

"Was this young lady in any way peculiar when she was with you?"

"She poked about among the hags in the village," said Olly, "and bothered a good deal about Eden stories and traditions. Mrs. Eden was the only acquaintance she made up to, though people liked her and her music."

"Deceitful beast," said Audrey, *sotto voce.*

"My dears, it's time for the choir practice," interposed Mrs. Harlay. When her daughters were gone she assumed a tragic air, and declared that "such duplicity should not be studied by young people. Mr. Dene, we have confidence in your judgment. What is to be done?"

"Mr. Harlay only can decide how he will treat that letter. I think the lady's claim is made in good faith, she may be deceived. I don't believe she means to deceive. Could there have been a private marriage in Francis Eden's life?"

The rector looked withered with vexation and anxiety. Mrs. Eden had seemed lately the last plank for the drowning Harlays, and the mere notion of Mademoiselle Gautier *in excelsis* left him spiritless. What a future mistress of the parish! What a despair for the Harlay ladies! He was personally fond of Elizabeth, and his heart and reason equally revolted from this story; yet he could not but allow that he had heard an old story of an elopement "with a worthless Swiss governess."

"It's hereditary. History as usual caught repeating herself," remarked Crumpets.

"But my dear old friend the late Mrs. Eden," continued Mrs. Harlay, "thoroughly investigated the business, and was satisfied. So well satisfied indeed, that she never let the subject be mentioned again, or even her son's name. Squire Philip himself didn't dare speak of his brother I have heard."

"That rather strengthens the idea that there was a serious entanglement," said Mr. Dene; "the chief hitch to this story is

the silence of these people all these years, but their proofs seem to have been imperfect, or they were as ignorant as the Edens probably were. It's a curious claim, and there is a *prima facie* credibility about it."

"Back your fancy," muttered Crumpets.

"Good gracious; Mr. Dene! you really think so. What are we to do? What a position! My poor dear Mrs. Eden to be assailed in this way. Yet if Mademoiselle Gautier is the legitimate grand-daughter —! I confess it is all too much for my poor nerves!" and Mrs. Harley executed some pianissimo and not disfiguring sobs hidden from vulgar ken by her aerial pocket-handkerchief and fluttering white fingers.

"I think, Harlay," said Mr. Dene, with a slight change of manner, "we have this to do at once. Go and see Mrs. Eden and stand by her as her friends. I think seriously enough of this affair, and we should not delay in offering her our sympathy and support."

"But," whined Mrs. Harlay, "if you think Mademoiselle Gautier has any standpoint—if she's borne out by facts?"

"Loyalty to our friend and neighbour needn't interfere with justice, quite otherwise."

"I may as well go too," observed Crumpets.

"Christopher, consider!" implored his wife; "be careful, your future position as rector requires caution. We may have made mistakes. Don't make more."

"There can be no mistake here," said Mr. Dene stiffly. "We shall, I hope, find that the whole business is a mare's nest, which is quite on the cards, indeed, probable. As I must go on to my meeting, Mrs. Eden will excuse an early visit."

"We're in the nature of a deputation," said Crumpets, "Church, State, and a reporter, meaning self."

"Of course I shall stand by Mrs. Eden," said the rector doggedly, "and what's more, I believe this to be just an attempt at extortion."

Mrs. Harlay, however, struck by Mr.

Dene's words, thenceforth resolved to maintain an armed neutrality.

Mr. Ravenscroft had hardly finished breakfast at Edenhurst when Elizabeth sent to let him know that she was in the drawing-room, and ready to see him at his convenience.

Eighteen hours had not passed since she had left her sick-room in the tremulous happiness of her first re-entry into ordinary life. Prosperous, high in county estimation, happy in her county duties among her tenants and dependents, her sphere of work had increased to be worthy of all her powers since her husband's death. Loving with the eager fulness of a woman in her prime, and trusting with the faith of a noble and loyal heart, she could not but be half drunk with joy as she felt renewed health and strength to drain to its uttermost the happiness that at last was at her lips.

How she fared the reader knows, and how her weakened soul and body suffered extreme of humiliation and jealous anguish, so that under the strain her sense of wrong

grew dim. Temptation might have conquered her had not her nervous power broken down under the terror of an optical illusion. When the ensuent stupor passed away she found herself among the bare and shattered wreck of what had been herself. There was not even reminiscence of good or beauty about the grim framework of her past. The framework remained the same, for no one changes altogether. But it was ghastly to her in every detail. She could only endure to think of it by bitter jokes against herself, hoping by scorn to strengthen her heart, and recover something of her former indifference.

But when she became conscious of the new day, she lay awhile stunned as like a long line of low surf the memories of the preceding hours beat upon her brain.

Gradually she understood her desolation. In a day all she valued had been taken from her—her faith in Ernest Harlay's truth, her sense of loving and being loved, and her power to help him, which had been the motive of her plans lately, were all gone.

For she went over again as she lay on her bed, her eyes shut, the words of those faded papers that were printed more legibly on her imagination than in reality they were readable. She had a shrinking dislike to them, yet she could not bear them out of her sight. The conviction had forced itself on her that they were genuine, and their consequences final. Her keen consciousness of the crime she had so narrowly escaped, and horror of it caused her henceforth to exaggerate her duty in respect of these papers, and she felt she must give fullest support to their validity. Worst of all her losses and least remediable had been her loss of self-respect. Loss of property and care of Ernest's affection she could endure to face, but she writhed and set her jaws, and wrung her hands till they were bruised in the agony of her pride when she thought how she had entertained thoughts worthy of a thief and a forger. Not therefore from any sense of justice or magnanimous self-denial came her eager desire to set herself right touching those documents. The poor tired, fever-exhausted

soul was all unbalanced. Yet that morning habitual honour and truth and her natural instincts were reasserting themselves, if in a morbid and vehement way. She blindly staggered forward as a valiant soldier might in a forlorn hope, though sick and dizzy from wounds.

In this temper she met Mr. Ravenscroft. He was shocked by her looks, and knew at once that he must not play with her will or attempt his favourite specifics against feminine excitement.

"I'm sorry to see you are far from strong yet, though I congratulate you on throwing off the fever," he said, gaining time to study her, for he was for a second uneasy for her mind. He noticed that her hands were cold and clammy, and she was pale with the grey pallor that comes when the blood hangs too sluggishly about the brain and heart. Her eyes were very bright and clear, and there was readiness, even eagerness, to face all that might happen, in her countenance.

"I am well enough, thank you, I wanted to see you at once. I have got at the

truth about the 'Lullin annuitants,' as we used to call them. They are, as I believe, the rightful owners of Edenhurst."

Certainly Mr. Ravenscroft had been haunted by doubts concerning these Lullin mysteries, and they had been quickened by Mademoiselle Gautier's conduct that morning. Still he stared blankly at Mrs. Eden as she declared her belief in her own ruin.

"Hardly that I think," he said soothingly.

"Read carefully what is here," answered Mrs. Eden, putting into his hand the Morandi pocket-book.

She watched him with a miserable, fixed smile on her face. The thought of her temptation was vivid to her. Now for ever it was put away, but hardly by her own honesty.

Mr. Ravenscroft went to the window, adjusted his glasses, and prepared himself for startling discoveries. Yet was he utterly confounded by what he read, read in what order he might.

"The devil's in this," he muttered. "They are forgeries admirably done."

Then Elizabeth told him how her courier had brought them to her on his uncle's death.

"Still there is abundant room for a conspiracy. It must be traced. The lives of these Morandis must be followed; everything to do with the Lullins passed under strong light. It will be, perhaps, a heavy affair. They are clever and desperate rogues, but I will see you through it, my dear Mrs. Eden. I pledge myself and my firm."

He was thoroughly excited, and he went on, not noticing the unaltered smile on his client's face. "How do we know even that this woman in the village is genuine? It is a wild, silly story. Ah! by the way, how did she get scent of these papers?

"I don't know. They have been lying about, yet I don't think she has seen them."

"The whole thing is a plant. What brought her here in this underhand way if she had proofs worth a brass farthing? She shall be punished, however. She shall pick oakum for her effrontery and airs," for the lawyer grew more bitter, and winced when

he thought how much and to what confidential talk she had attracted him.

"My good friend," said Mrs. Eden, "this has come on you suddenly, and you refuse to believe for my sake."

"For the sake of the Edens and the property, for the sake of the late Mrs. Eden and my friend, your husband! Have you no regard for them, their honour and their memory? But I sincerely beg your pardon, I am too rough, but I can't help being indignant with you for giving a second's countenance to the imposture."

"I believe that these papers are genuine, and that Mademoiselle Gautier is Francis Eden's grand-daughter."

"For God's sake speak lower. Look here, my poor dear friend; you are tired; this is too much for you; leave it to me."

Mrs. Eden had not expected visitors so early, and had given no orders about them; so as she was about to reply Mr. Dene, Mr Harlay, and Mr. Crumpington (Crumpet's official name) were announced.

"Excuse yourself;" whispered Mr. Ravenscroft in dismay, but Elizabeth was

in no temporizing or prudent mood. She received her friends with particular grace and dignity, for her powers were at high pressure. She was at her best if it had not been for the traces of her fever in mind and body, and they were for the time obliterated by sheer strength of will. She looked inquiringly at the three men, for as Crumpets said, there was something of the deputation in their early visit.

"First let me apologize for asking for you at such an hour," said Mr. Dene, with marked respect in his manner and an emotion he could not repress altogether. "I am on my way to a county meeting in West Sussex, and I wished to be among the first to tell you how we all rejoice in your recovery."

"Thank you, and you had nothing else to tell me?" asked Mrs. Eden, whose thoughts had rushed to Ernest Harlay, for Mr. Dene recalled her first acquaintance with his friend on the Mer de Glace.

"I believe Mr. Harlay wants to ask you what you would like done about a letter he

got to-day, and I asked him to let me come with him."

Still Elizabeth was haunted by the scotched snake of her love, and she said with effort,—

"From whom was the letter, Mr. Harlay?"

"I hardly care to trouble you with such rubbish. But as Mr. Ravenscroft is here you may as well see it. The writer has been your guest, you know, and you have been very kind to her or I would not have brought the thing to you. I will do whatever you like about having her seen to either by a mad doctor or the police."

Mrs. Eden read the letter through and gave it to Mr. Ravenscroft, who watched her anxiously as did Mr. Dene.

She said deliberately, "I have reason to believe that Mademoiselle Gautier's claim has a solid foundation."

Mr. Ravenscroft shrugged his shoulders.

"I found last night that I was in ignorant possession of papers which support her assertions."

"They are forgeries I swear!" broke in Mr. Ravenscroft.

"Just as you came in I was considering with Mr. Ravenscroft how these documents can be quickly and effectually tested for the satisfaction of my friends. For myself I believe them genuine, and if so, and Mademoiselle Gautier be who she profess to be, her position is made out."

"My dear madam," said Mr. Ravenscroft "allow me to say these are legal matters, and must be treated legally not Quixotically. You have taken these gentlemen into your confidence. I hope they will respect it. There may be grounds for an action for fraud and conspiracy against Mademoiselle Gautier. I must protest against your moving any more in the business."

"Don't be angry with me," said Mrs. Eden gently, but steadily, "if I say at once that I must judge of my own conduct in this affair. I will act as I think right. If I am satisfied of the evidence and not shaken by the flaws you may point out, I will not make use of law to retard justice. I have

none but myself happily whose interests I have to consider."

"No others! and your husband's wishes and his mother's plans and labours."

"Oh, let me hear no more such sophistries!" exclaimed Mrs. Eden hotly, for she remembered how they had beset her the night before. "You hear my resolution, Mr. Harlay, so you will have no difficulty in answering that letter. My friends will help me best if they will help me to act justly."

"It's a trumped-up lie!" said the rector miserably. "Ravenscroft knows it is."

"But if it should not be a lie, and I don't think it is one, you'll help me?"

"I'll help you," said Rudolf Dene, "with all my heart and mind I'll help you. You are behaving as a noble lady should. You are tenfold right. Be it for us, your friends, to see that you receive the justice you would do."

"Pish!" said Mr. Ravenscroft. "If she shows her hand, it's simple suicide."

"No harm. She is right. Let us see how

we can protect her. If the claim is just, better to admit it without *chicane*. It's a question of facts I take it, not of law. It would go to a jury. Now we are as well able to judge of facts as a jury. Take all your measures at once for getting what information you can. I don't know what it will be. But, my dear sir, I trust Mrs. Eden's instinct before yours. She thinks the claim provable."

"I suppose every claim's provable till it's disproved," grumbled Mr. Ravenscroft. "I have a mind to back out of the whole d—d business if it's to be conducted in this mad fashion."

"No, old friend, you won't," said Mrs. Eden. "You know better than I that there are higher laws than those bound in calf on your shelves."

"Ah! let me see the higher laws properly interpreted by experienced judges then."

Mr. Dene, drawing the lawyer aside, asked to see the papers spoken of. "If as I gather Mademoiselle Gautier goes on other evidence than these," he said, "they gain weight."

"There is something behind all this I don't understand," said Mr. Ravenscroft. "Mrs. Eden's conduct isn't natural. Why isn't Sir Ernest Harlay here? Mr. Dene, I'll move heaven and earth to keep that intriguer out; she has driven this noble woman to rash folly by her tricks."

Mr. Dene looked at his watch, and had to go. "I know a fellow in Geneva who will see after these Lullin people," he said, stroking his brown moustache thoughtfully; "I will telegraph to him as I pass the post-office here. Why not send down at once to the church where Francis Eden was married? You have clerks capable of that. We must work in parallel lines to Mrs. Eden you see, or she will be handing over the house to these pretenders. I never thought I should respect a woman so much. They're generally vague in such affairs, dim about honour and justice."

"You'd find plenty to admire at Hanwell," growled the angry lawyer.

Crumpets took leave with Mr. Dene. The rector monotonously insisting that it was a vile fraud, and wilfully refusing to

entertain any part of the story, grew so wearisome to Elizabeth that she left him to have his brains picked bare by Mr. Ravenscroft of all he knew concerning the viper hatched at the rectory.

No doubt there was much in Mrs. Eden's motives incomprehensible by her friends. The possible loss of property would not have roused her to such resolute decision or string her nerves to a like tension. Her broken love for Ernest Harlay influenced her thoughts and actions. It had tempted her to the edge of crime, and now it exaggerated her self-reproach. For if he knew! Before him she had been accused of fraud by Alphonsine Gautier, and there remained the stinging knowledge that the accusation was nearly true, and to all these thoughts the burden ran that after all she was nothing to him any more.

"I will not put a difficulty in her way," said Elizabeth to herself. "I will further her, and so Sir Ernest Harlay shall not find me obstructive. Harlay Abbot can be preserved to him without the burden of my love."

Her face grew very scornful, and not good to see as she thought it out and pictured Ernest and Mademoiselle Gautier in her drawing-room and loitering among her flowers.

An irrepressible wish to have done with it all came to her. She sent a servant to the Eden Arms, asking that Mademoiselle Gautier might come to her. She wanted to see again the woman Ernest had preferred to her. To get if she could the poor pleasure of thinking that he had been influenced by Alphonsine's chance of inheriting Edenhurst. To find out what, if any, actual engagement had been entered into between them. Yet she loathed with sick repulsion the thought of probable "love passages."

CHAPTER IX.

But Mademoiselle Gautier had gone to London. She had after all been in time for the morning train, her interview with Mr. Ravenscroft having so abruptly terminated. She wished to secure even the official countenance of the firm of agents who transacted her mother's English business.

So Mrs. Eden was told, and also that the landlady would give the message on Mademoiselle Gautier's return which was expected that afternoon, and "Luncheon is served, ma'am," followed in the same breath.

So habit reasserted its sway. Mrs. Eden chose before Mr. Ravenscroft to seem well. She led the way to the dining-room, as she might have done two months ago,

and forced herself to eat and drink as usual, to ask the morning news and "be herself."

But Mr. Ravenscroft sat glum. He had already sent off two telegrams. One containing full instructions to a trustworthy clerk, ordering him to go by the first express to whatever station was nearest to Whinfell Church, Yorkshire, directing him what searches to make, and asking for a report as soon as was practicable. The other telegram was to Morandi, Domo D'Ossola, offering him full compensation if he would come at once to England. At all events what man could do to check women's flightiness should be done. If Mrs. Eden betrayed her post as guardian of Eden interests he would work double tides for them. "Ah," he meditated, "when women are good they are fools, when they are clever and sensible they're dangerous." Food and wine (and she drank a tumbler of Bordeaux) were of great service to Mrs. Eden, who in truth was spending the last reserves of her nervous energy—food and wine in her bodily con-

dition narcotized her, and she was obliged to rest for two or three hours. She fell asleep, poor soul, and all her household made a cordon of quiet round her room. Her servants were angrily distracted by flying rumours, fierce in support of their mistress, and not unlike bees when the queen bee is touched. Their energies had no outlet but in keeping the under-servants unnaturally silent, which was not inconsistent with a good deal of talk among the chiefs.

"I've had that person's room purified," said Mrs. Hewett, "and Sarah found this envelope addressed to her as Chénevière. It's plain she was an Elias, and when people have recourse to be Eliases it's a certain proof of deep-laid badness."

"However missis took up with the trolloping thing passes my understanding," said Tompkins, "and that gaby Cesare is in it too."

"I don't hold with foreigners," observed Mrs. Hewett.

"I take them as I find them, some good and more bad," said the experienced Tompkins.

"Now you ladies can't ever see both sides of the shield at once," argued the butler, for the Olympians of the backstairs were having dessert in 'the room.' He would have argued anything, however heretical, for he liked to hear himself.

"I don't know what shields has to do with this," said Mrs. Hewett, unless it be the shield of Providence to preserve us from artful and designing wolves in sheeps' wool."

"Time alone will explain the mystery, for there is more than meets the eye," said the butler oracularly. "I put it to you as a woman of sense, Mrs. Hewitt, why the young woman has been sent for again?"

"You knows nothing about it, Mr. Parker," broke in Tompkins, flushed with zeal and dinner, "Missis considers that Swiss thing dirt under her feet. But there is a third party which I'm not free to mention, and he is the horry go male (*origo male*).

"I love my love with a B because he's a Bart," said Mr. Parker winking, "and I hate him because he's a bandoned."

"Because he's a base booby," flamed Tompkins, "riding to and fro as stuck up as a dog with two tails, seeking what he may devour of the crumbs under missis' table, and when she lay on her bed of sickness taking up with a brazen serpent. Ugh! the ways of men!"

"Well, Miss Tompkins," said the philosophical butler, "you'll agree that my age gives me more experience than you can be expected to have. Now I tell you we're near a remarkable change of wind, re-mark-a-ble;" whereat he put his finger against his nose, and then rising with a profound sigh he refused to explain what his dark saying meant. Yet after his refusal, such is human inconsistency, he went on to say,—

"It's not for nothing that the rector looked as if he'd seen a ghost when he went away, and I ask you where is Mrs. Harlay?"

"Oh she's frightened of the fever," said Mrs. Hewett.

"So you think, but with her known dislike to this mamzelle it's curious that she has not been over to crow a bit."

"You makes too much of a low governess, Mr. Parker; ladies don't keep no account of their comings and goings."

"There's governesses, and there's also governesses," said the butler. "Now you see if this one ain't a ugly duck as the fable describes."

"She'll never be a duck of mine, and ugly is as ugly does," remarked Tompkins, moodily retiring on tiptoe as a mark of loyal devotion to her mistress.

Mademoiselle Gautier returned to Edenhurst discouraged from seeing her mother's agents. They could not further her plans an inch, and they threw iced water on her suggestions and guesses. Her idea that the late Mrs. Eden, Alphonsine's great-grandmother, had bribed Morandi would not bear the light. Without ample proof to sustain such assertions they could only damage the person who made them, but—

"Bring a single real proof, however slender of a marriage," the partner said to whom she had spoken "and we will see to it. You must be prepared to make a considerable outlay. Possession is nine points.

Even if your tenth were as clear as day, you have a heavy and uphill battle to fight. Of course the actual proprietor will make you prove every link in your story, and that probably in two or three courts. There is obscurity about the first consideration for the annuity, but there are a dozen ways of accounting for that. Forgive me too if I remind you that it is your mother who must appear, you have but a contingent interest."

It was all excellent sense, and the London bustle, the audible grinding of the machine that makes or mars its three million souls in daily attrition, sobered her fancies. Her hopes had been pampered in the air of Edenhurst, but she returned with humbler thoughts to the Eden Arms. To compromise might be desirable if yet possible, she regretted her letter to the rector. It must now, however, be justified at all hazards, yet with deprecation. Reviewing her armour offensive and defensive, she smiled to think how her good looks might help her, and her thoughts went to Sir Ernest Harlay's infatuation, for to her cool judg-

ment it seemed little else; yet inconvenient as it might prove she could not regret it. "It may all end well for me, if not for that disdainful Mrs. Eden; superior as she affects to be, but not even able to hide her game!"

She was not very much surprised by the message to go up to Edenhurst house. She was prepared for any events, and glad that they should come quickly.

Mrs. Eden had not told Mr. Ravenscroft of the visit that she expected. She wished to see Mademoiselle Gautier alone, and he might insist on being a witness, which would not do, for there were other interests besides the Edenhurst inheritance which might be spoken of.

Elizabeth had rested. Her mind was steadier, and she had better control over herself. She had resolved to judge in the first instance of this woman and her pretensions, whether to Ernest's love or the Eden estates. It was a crucial interview, but her courage was high.

It was six o'clock when Mademoiselle Gautier slowly walked through the trim

pleasure grounds towards the house. Not a leaf seemed out of place; the flower-beds were at their fullest colour. The big St. Bernard dog received her courteously if rather grimly. Her heart beat fast as she walked up the steps; she paused a second, and then rang sharply, for was it not all properly hers, and should be actually if utmost effort could avail to help the right.

She was shown into the larger drawing-room, Mr. Ravenscroft was up to his elbows in papers in the library. Mrs. Eden gave orders that she should not be interrupted, and so nearly in the same spot where they had parted the evening before the women met again.

From the very height of her pride Elizabeth chose to forget the insults then given her. She did not, however, offer her hand, but she pushed a chair slightly forward for her guest.

Mademoiselle Gautier had begun almost inarticulately, "Allow me to recall," when Mrs. Eden, taking as her right priority in formal apology, interrupted:—

"I have to explain what naturally you have misunderstood. I begin by saying that I consider your severe words were partly justified by appearances. I have asked you to come here as my health did not let me go to you, because I wish to act with justice and honour. Mademoiselle, up to last night, after you went, I did not know what papers Cesare Morandi had brought."

Alphonsine bowed her head; she was keenly watchful, and suspicious.

"I offer you frank confidence as amends for my mistake, will you meet me with the same?"

"I shall follow your example, madame."

"I ask you then, before I go further, to tell me if you knew what those papers were?"

After a moment's consideration, Mademoiselle Gautier said that she did not know further than that they were of grave importance.

"I ask of you also, very earnestly, and I beg of you to tell me if—if Sir Ernest Harlay knew of your birth and claims."

"Madame, emphatically no—no one in

this place knew more of me than you yourself; not so much, for I told you many of my thoughts."

So then it was a true personal preference, not any need of money which had influenced Ernest. Mrs. Eden did not speak again of him. She was at once more deeply wounded, and yet relieved; she went on. "Cesare's pocket-book was found in my bed-room upstairs; I looked at the papers in it last night; you say you do not know what they were; I will tell you; I will show them to you. I have not lied or defrauded you as you said."

"Madame, I spoke in rash haste, in ungovernable excitement," said Alphonsine hoarsely, for could it indeed be that these papers were important in her case? Would Mrs. Eden show them if they were?

"Friends tell me," said Elizabeth, "that I cannot be sure that you are who you say, you are here under a false name, yet I will try your truth. Who can say where truth is or is not? You have written to Mr. Harlay to say that you are the granddaughter of Francis Eden."

"Ah! You have seen my letter."

"Certainly, and I, acting now on my own judgment against the opinion of my adviser, hope that your response to my dealing will justify it."

"As yet, madame, it is I who have dealt frankly and answered all your questions. I am the only child of my mother. My mother was the only child of Francis Eden, born after he was drowned. Verify these facts when you like. But these papers!"

"One more question. Was all your devotion to me mere treachery? Only to worm out the secrets of the house?"

"You know enough to see how mixed are motives. I would not have harmed a hair of your head. I did my best for your recovery. A father dying miserably, a ruined home, and the conviction of a just cause, excuse what reserves I kept."

"Here are the papers," said Mrs. Eden, wearied by the impenetrable caution of Mademoiselle Gautier's manner. The sun was low behind the pine trees, and the eager woman took the faded documents to the light.

For all her strength and energy, she was forced to sit down in the shock of her surprise. All these years a paralyzed Swiss peasant had held the secret, and by what chance it had been brought to light, and by what further chance these title-deeds had come to the hands of the person most interested in their suppression?

Her better self was stirred by Mrs. Eden's magnanimity; again, as if she could not believe them real, she read and pondered the proofs of that story which she had by persistent hope and faith evolved from slight indications.

So her dreams were to be realities. Surely Mrs. Eden could not have cruelly set these papers before her if they were not quite true and valid, and if true, why that house and room, the old pictures, the gardens and trees, the Eden Arms where she had been treated with scant civility were hers. She had thought of it all before. She never felt it till now. Elizabeth watched her. She was satisfied by Alphonsine's looks that the papers were, if forgeries, forgeries unknown to this claim-

ant in any case. Insensibly, her judgment of the girl's conduct became less severe as conviction that she was in any case an Eden increased. If only Ernest had been loyal!

Mademoiselle Gautier stood staring out at the sunset till Mrs. Eden said slowly,—

"Certain inquiries must be made, certain forms observed. I will put no unnecessary difficulties in the way."

"Ah, madame" her French blood asserted itself, and in a second Alphonsine was at Mrs. Eden's knees, kissing her hand impetuously, "you shall not go! we will divide. You are worthier than we are; only duly acknowledge us as your kinswomen."

Mrs. Eden drew her hand quietly away.

"Some things we cannot divide," she said; "I am not influenced by sentiment, but I hope by justice. You owe me no gratitude, if, when you are proved my husband's relations, I accept the fact."

The extreme coldness of her manner threw Alphonsine back. She was not one, however, to sacrifice what of substantial advantage she had gained through any impulse of feeling. Her Genevan ex-

periences and French energy of common sense (a common sense which does not, however, consider stiffness of manner necessary as an advertisement) kept feeling within bounds. Her new position must be strengthened. Mrs. Eden's words reminded her of her isolation, and perhaps, for the first time, she was uncomfortably conscious, that not she but her mother was the actual claimant to the Eden inheritance. Success, since it was near, had some troublesome contingencies. She remained silent, and Mrs. Eden went on :—

"It is right, I think, that you should come here at once, and not return to the village. Mr. Ravenscroft is here. He has not taken the same view as I have of these papers. But it is my right to judge of my own conduct," she added, wearily iterating her determination.

"I will do what you like, madame," said Alphonsine; "I cannot do better."

So, with formal courtesy, Elizabeth led the way to Mademoiselle Gautier's room, and telling her that dinner would be at eight, she left her. She was careful to

avoid thought, and forced herself to read a *Times* leader on Irish affairs until dinner time. At first Mr. Ravenscroft refused to sit at table with Mademoiselle Gautier, but on second thoughts he resolved to protect Mrs. Eden as far as might be by his presence. None but the most commonplace subjects were spoken of during that strange meal. It was impossible that Alphonsine should not view with fresh interest the plate, the old china, the boar-hunt by Snyders, with bits of Rubens in it, and the Chippendale furniture. The servants seemed different, not in their manner, but her sense of it. Even the roast mutton she ate with appetite, conscious of being more English than she had yet felt herself to be. She was not troubled by Mr. Ravenscroft's silence and sulks. Some day, not far off, society would think more of her than of him, "for quickly comes such knowledge to the heart."

To preserve the excellent hypocrisies of life, and knowing that drawing-room talk was impossible, though dinner had dragged through, Mrs. Eden asked her to play.

Hating her ever so well, Mr. Ravenscroft could not hate the sounds that trickled from her fingers.

He grew more and more angry with Mrs. Eden as he saw her white face whiten in thought. He revolved in his mind crushing legal conferences, settled what counsel to retain if the "Lullin lot" dared to persevere. The affair must be got out of the hands of the women, who, of course, could not be treated quite seriously. Meantime he decided to wait till the afternoon express next day, as he might have news from Yorkshire and Geneva, which would crush the imposture out of hand.

Mr. Ravenscroft vaguely wondered why Sir Ernest Harlay, whom he believed Mrs. Eden's suitor, had not appeared, but he had no conception that Sir Ernest Harlay's relations with Mademoiselle Gautier largely influenced Mrs. Eden.

Harlay Abbot had not proved a comfortable harbour for its master, on his return from Edenhurst, confused and humiliated as he was. Who shall say how far the ill-cooked beef-steak for his unexpected dinner

had been to blame for the sleeplessness which left him a prey to his uneasy conscience. Who shall say in what exact proportions small things work with big events?

Next morning, his circumstances seemed very dark to him. Habitually he read some verses of the Bible, and with a not uncommon superstition that indeed more than once changed the fortunes of England, when Cromwell was its governor, he looked for guidance from the words he lighted on. That day, they had, or seemed to have, no meaning for him. He flung away the book and for the first time for years, he left his room, without spiritual communion or appeal. He had a spite against the trifling circumstances which had given his Edenhurst dalliances more importance in Mrs. Eden's eyes than they deserved.

Characters like his and trained as his was to reference of the events of life to supernatural causes, rather than to our own conduct, have, however, curious elasticity. No one can doubt the temporal uses of superstition, or the energy it imparts—particularly when, as in Ernest Harlay, the

enthusiastic temperament is hereditary, and as ingrained as any physical peculiarity.

The way in which the pressure of personal responsibility is shifted by such superstition as his was curiously exemplified in the view he took of his own conduct in respect of Mrs. Eden. It is a common puzzle why excellent and sincere fanatics are so often wanting in personal honour and clear judgment. Trusting as Joan of Arc did to "voices," seldom, however, inspired as hers were, they do not accept social law and order as those do who live solely by its dictates. So, as they rise higher, they also fall lower than do men of the ordinary world. Yet their fall probably injures them less than if they had trusted as most men do to the strength of their habitual honour and honesty. Ernest Harlay found his usual consolations presently restored. His depression and temporary treason to his faith passed away, for he looked on them as temptations of a definite evil power. The thought was invigorating, for it is easier for a man to wrestle with an enemy than to recognize his own faults.

As agents in such work as can be effected by religious enthusiasm, it is idle to underestimate the usefulness of such more or less "possessed" men, yet it may not fare well with those who trust them, when the loyalty of personal honour is eclipsed by religiosity. The religion which truly secures such loyalty, and which perfects conscience, is other than his. Based on authority it is not a mere whiff of personal aspiration. Though it accepts, it does not rely on co-operation of the devotional temperament.

Indeed, a fresh and yet more eager confidence in himself followed on Ernest's temporary discomfiture, and he sincerely believed that by divine assistance he was again mounted on his evangelizing hobby. Who shall say how far a cold bath, a better breakfast than was his supper, and a walk in the fresh autumn morning renewed his confidence.

The letters he received by the midday post were harder to treat philosophically than the Edenhurst complication. No one ever yet left sufficient margin for the apparently spontaneous multiplication of debts. While the weeks drag on of finan-

cial dodging and compromise, arrears of interest, counted by hundreds, swell to thousands.

That day he had to face the certainty, that not only must his estates be sold as soon as a purchaser could be found, but that, all calculations made, there would most likely be a deficit rather than a surplus on his side of the account.

This was sufficiently grim fact to sober fancy, and to prove a tonic useful to cure all Edenhurst fever. Yet now that it was quite clear to him that without such help as he might have had from Mrs. Eden's wealth he was a ruined man, it must be said that he did not on that account the more regret his entanglement with Alphonsine. He never had liked the position of pauper suitor, and it had been a continual drag on his courtship. He could gladly accept what pain and humiliation lay in his ruin, once convinced that it was a divine decree. He almost pleased himself with the prospect as a bit of nineteenth-century martyrdom. How could he be blamed for the morbid egotism of all this

when his creed to which he fervently clung ministered to it.

But this morbid egotism is as supporting for a time as any narcotic, and by the next day Sir Ernest was ready to do battle after his fashion with the world, the flesh, and the devil, ready to see mercies, providences, and divine encouragements in the most obscure events.

Credited now with good intention and zeal for souls, the conduct which in the light of Mrs. Eden's clear eyes had seemed to him all wrong became at least excusable. On him, in any case, would fall the penalty of it. He had no clear idea of what Mademoiselle Gautier had meant by her attack on Mrs. Eden. He thought that the whole scene was but an effervescence of feminine anger and jealousy. His respect and even sympathy were altogether with Mrs. Eden. Yet Alphonsine held him by a sort of spell, strong when he thought of her, and irresistible when he was within her immediate influence.

There remained to him a good cob in his stable, able to trot the fifteen miles to

Edenhurst in an hour and a half, and on the second day of his solitary reflections Ernest found himself riding thitherwards. He was drawn by at least a dozen curiosities, by another dozen of good intentions, all edged by thoughts of Alphonsine. He had a vague wish to see his uncle and air his new intentions. The rector would be very much cut up, but it was better to tell him at once that he was to expect no sort of help from Harlay Abbot. A sort of impatience was on him to "have done" with his Sussex ties and to join those who work at a Puritan revival, whether on platforms or in Belgravian boudoirs—in Exeter hall or by itinerant gospelling.

By an effort he could thrust away self-reproach. He had not strength to face it. But turning away, he called his cowardice faith. He was crossing the forest land near the village of Edenhurst, when Mr. Dene rode up almost unheard behind.

CHAPTER X.

"Well, Harlay! Inditing the hundred and fifty-first Psalm, I imagine! Have you come over to see Mrs. Eden?" he asked. "What do you think of the business?"

"The business," answered Sir Ernest; hesitating and frowning more than ever, "I don't know what you mean."

"Why it's the event of the day, a play with real pump and tubs in it. Two heroines both in white satin, and any amount of fine language. I thought you were a good deal here."

"I'm not in the secret," said Sir Ernest, trying to force a smile with bad success.

"Really! Well you know the gaudy governess your aunt picked up at Geneva has claimed that and those the Eden estates, and I'm inclined to think she is not an impostor."

"Alphonsine Gautier!"

Mr. Dene looked hard at his friend.

"That is the name she goes by. But I have just got a telegram from Geneva which calls her Chénevière."

"You have! and may I know what you have to do with it?"

"Certainly, my dear fellow, you shall know, for I imagine you have some right to inquire. But where were you yesterday? I'm not a romantic fellow, but it's sure that when I heard and saw Mrs. Eden yesterday I was bound to serve her all I could. I know no nobler woman, Harlay," he added very seriously.

"I wish you would explain."

"You know that this Swiss girl has been domesticated at Edenhurst by a series of chances or mischances. It appears that Francis Eden the scamp, was married, and she is his only grandchild. Mrs. Eden has just found some papers establishing all this, and notwithstanding Ravenscroft's fury she openly says she is convinced by them; of course the thing must be properly tested, the lawyer raves,

he can't conceive what fly has stung his client. But it was worth hearing her tell him that justice was more than law. She looked as Antigone might have looked. This pretender has been insolent to her besides. Now perfect generosity and rapid decision are not common modern virtues. I have a right to recognize a noble woman, so don't bite your thumb at me, old fellow."

"Still," said Ernest Harlay slowly, "I don't see what you had to do with a telegram from Geneva."

"Only this. If it was simple imposture, I thought I might stop it. Mrs. Eden fairly made a knight *servante* of me, for which I suppose you will call me out; the future heiress of the Edens will cut me, and my Lady of the Leaf won't thank me. I sent to Geneva for news of the Gautier."

"Well."

"And here is the answer, just come," said Mr. Dene who read out—

"'Affirmative reply to all your questions. She is authentic. Father's mother's name was Gautier?' This has nothing to do, however, with her claim to be an Eden.

But here comes the lawyer with a telegram too. Bad news evidently, my dear sir."

"It's a clever plot, very," groaned Mr. Ravenscroft, whose whiskers were uncurled, aad whose hand shook. "A little more trouble to expose her, that's all; Mrs. Eden is incautious, deucedly incautious. One would think she was bewitched to have that girl under her roof. How do you do, Sir Ernest? I hope you will try and stop the folly rampant at Edenhurst."

"Is Mademoiselle Gautier at Edenhurst?" said Sir Ernest.

"That's why I'm out here. I can't stay in the house with her. She's a nightmare."

"But what news from Yorkshire?" asked Mr. Dene.

"Not quite satisfactory—not altogether—but I don't wish this mentioned to Mrs. Eden."

"No use, my good sir. Mrs. Eden will guess better than you can hide."

Mr. Ravenscroft would not trust himself with more words. He hurried on towards the Post Office to send fresh orders to his clerk.

Mr. Dene and Sir Ernest rode on together towards the rectory. Rudolf had but a vague notion of his friend's perplexities. He could not have guessed for all his insight that Alphonsine Gautier would have caught the fancy of any man preferred by Elizabeth. Yet he could not account for Sir Ernest's embarrassed depression. Even his horse moved sluggishly, and stumbled under the dead weight of its troubled rider.

"You are coming up to see Mrs. Eden?" asked Mr. Dene.

"No, I am going to the rectory."

Rudolf Dene turned squarely round and looked at Ernest, then he said gently, "We were good friends in India, Harlay, so forgive me if I ask plainly if Mrs. Eden loses this property, will it be your loss too? Are you engaged to her?"

"No," he answered sullenly.

"I know something of your affairs since your father's time. I understand how this is crushing luck for you, but, old fellow, she's worth ten Edenhursts in herself. She's the noblest woman I know. Stick

to her for richer, for poorer, if she likes you."

Sir Ernest remained silent. He pulled at his moustache and stared straight between his horse's ears.

"I tell you fairly, I think it's on the cards that the shopkeeper girl wins."

"What did you call her?"

"Shopkeeper. Didn't you know? I forgot you are all in the dark. My telegram confirms a memory I had of her helping her father Chénevière in his curiosity shop at Geneva. But she's none the worse for that, though naturally if she comes in for this estate she'll be a beggar on horseback."

"Look here, Dene, you are very obliging I know to concern yourself in my affairs, but you will please stop this talk of Mademoiselle Gautier."

Ernest Harlay was very pale, and there was a half undecided, half fierce look on his face new to it.

"What! Harlay! And Mrs. Eden liked you! and you preferred—you preferred—"

"Have done. I give no account to you or any man of what I do."

"For God's sake, Harlay, one word," said Mr. Dene very earnestly. "Tell me if you knew of this stranger's claim to Edenhurst."

The question might have been answered honestly, but Ernest Harlay had been at war with himself all the morning, all the past month indeed. His anger rose uncontrollably at the implied motive. He muttered some incoherent words, and turned his horse sharply round. He could not speak for gusty rage, but he signed with his crop that Mr. Dene's way was not his.

A look of pained disgust settled on Rudolph Dene's face. When other men had laughed at Sir Ernest as a pious prig, Mr. Dene had stood up for him. He had been interested in such a marked case of Puritan survival, and Ernest's individuality of conviction was honourable in an age of mass opinions and fashionable unfaiths. But the strong, honourable man could not understand what he saw that day in his friend. Ernest Harlay's conduct looked

very bad, worse than in truth it was. His good qualities, as often happens, his scruples and conscientious uneasiness had given the worst colour to his vacillation about Mrs. Eden.

"Cur," muttered Mr. Dene as he rode on. One more instance was set down in the list he chose to keep of cases which proved the powerlessness of the English religious training to prepare men of our time for honourable life in it. Anglicanism is evidently a compromise outworn, he thought. There was great tenderness and concern in his heart for Mrs. Eden, and he set her higher than ever in contrast with Sir Ernest Harlay, who, as he thought, had simply courted her estates, incapable of appreciating herself. Mr. Dene began to guess vaguely why Elizabeth had made little opposition to the claims of the woman whom Ernest had preferred.

"She must love the fellow well indeed," he thought, "and have abundant pride to carry her through, and get the better of her natural vanity. Certainly she is like Saul, a head and shoulders bigger than

her kind. It is indeed a 'cursed spite' that I should love her so, and have lost her so."

Meantime, Ernest Harlay, in a rage with his friend, his love, and himself, tried in vain to pull himself together His usual salves were worse than empty formulas to him, mere bodiless receipts for peace that made but worse unrest. All that had seemed real and valuable in his life appeared to be slipping fatally from his grasp—Harlay Abbot—his friends, self-respect, and self-control, were going together. Well, let them go. At least, and all the less fettered he could obey his passion for Alphonsine that grew apace in the disorder of his thoughts. There need be no more reticences and precautions. If she were a shopkeeper all the better, he bitterly thought, and he had not accepted her pretensions to Edenhurst as for a moment tenable. He would forsake the past, and take his pastime, for nearly allied are passionate piety and passionate recklessness, both implying relaxation of the will. He refused to hamper himself by going just then into these claims

and disputed rights. Mademoiselle Gautier attracted him as no woman yet had done. So he would obey the attraction!

Without giving faith to all the tales told of odic force and the like, it might have been a question how far in the turmoil of his nature Ernest Harlay was affected by the fact that quite near him at the moment, coming along a path hidden by a hedge from the road, was Mademoiselle Gautier. He saw her as he turned in towards the rectory gate.

In a second he had thrown himself off his horse, and with a vehement impetuosity quite new to him he was telling her his case. There was no question now of higher motives or religious zeal for her welfare. His passion was shown without reserve in his eager eyes and by the tremble in his voice. Alphonsine was not without experience of courtship, but she had never known any flame burn so fiercely as this. It seemed to Ernest as if here were for him a last throw for fortune. He was obscurely aware of the grim Mephistophiles that played with him—at last aware. Faith,

Hope, and Love—in this world at least, of the next, he would not think—were that day staked on the chance of winning some return of love from this ex-governess of his cousins.

She had not before taken his love-making quite seriously. She had received it as part of her comedy. What she called the "mômier" side of his character had never been understood by her. Now, however, he was intelligible enough. She could see that he had flung his whole being into this love with feverish recklessness. It was a homage new to her, accustomed as she had been to mere flirtations over *bric-à-brac*, and formal proposals from respectable young bourgeois of her father's rank.

"What is all this?" Sir Ernest asked almost roughly, seeing that she came from Edenhurst House. "What are you doing there? Are you raising obstacles between us? I tell you they shall not stand."

"Sir Ernest," she said softly, half frightened, half proud, because of the violence of his manner, "why are you

angry? It is not my fault if Mrs. Eden herself recognizes me as the grandchild of Francis Eden!"

"Why are you under her roof? Is Mrs. Eden your friend; what is this bond between you?"

"Mrs. Eden is a very noble and good woman," said Mademoiselle Gautier slowly. "Why did you pretend you loved her! She gave you gold for your ormolu."

"And you say that in that deliberate scornful way of yours. Yet you know why it was so, why I gave up that 'noble and good woman's' love and followed you," said Sir Ernest, with cynical contempt of himself and his conduct, though he could not reverse it while Alphonsine's spell was on him.

"How can I know why?" retorted Mademoiselle Gautier; "perhaps because of my scornful way, perhaps because I was not noble and good, and did not live up in the heavens like you and her. One must touch earth sometimes, perhaps for you I was the friendly earth."

"I am not inclined for allegories. I don't know, and I don't choose to know,

anything of you except as Alphonsine Gautier. You may have claims to half England. They have been thrown in my teeth, but they shall not come between you and me. Look you, Alphonsine, I am a ruined man, I mean to earn my bread. You hate that, don't you, yet I mean that you shall be my wife."

"Whether I consent or not! That is hard on me, and very English; and afterwards you will sell me at Smithfield. No, it is as I wish that you shall do, my friend."

"Alphonsine, treat me kindly to-day. I have lost a good deal through you."

"Do you mean Mrs. Eden and her wealth, if it exists!"

"Great heavens, do you too insult me. Not Mrs. Eden, but all the trust, and calm, and hope I had, is leaving me, and it is your doing, and yet I can't give you up—I know my folly. But I swear that you shall not be lost to me as the rest is. Alphonsine—witch—angel—I know not what you are, will you be my wife?"

"Monsieur, we do not arrange these matters without our parents' consent."

"How dare you trifle with me?" and Sir Ernest took her wrist and held it more tightly than he knew.

"What has become of your Evangel? Is this the way to convert me to your doctrines?"

"How dare you?" repeated Ernest very white.

"Dare! my friend, it is you who dare too much. You are changed. Why do you not speak to me of my soul any more?"

She had a curiosity to see how far she could drive him off his old line. It was a triumph to her to see this Christian offering incense at her pagan altar. She did not comprehend what anguish of self-reproach and shattered pride lay under Sir Ernest's reckless courtship.

"Your soul," he repeated sternly. "Do not blaspheme, mademoiselle. I have counted that cost. Will you answer me? Alphonsine, I don't think you will ever be loved again as I have loved you, as I love you to-day."

There was a tone in his voice that

hushed frivolous flippancy. "Will you be my wife?" he repeated.

He was far more attractive now than he had ever been before.

"Yes," she said, looking straight into his eyes, and measuring at once the passion in them and her power. "I like you better this way. You shall be my husband. Whatever comes, remember, whatever comes."

He caught her in his arms with a sob, quite over-mastered by conflicting sense of loss and gain. Alphonsine calmer, though stirred by excessive emotion, drew herself a little apart. They had been walking among thickets of rhododendrons; they came face to face on the rector, Mrs. Harlay, and Isolda, who were bound for some village duty connected with the school or choir. Mrs. Harlay looked on success in either as socially useful and indeed necessary to the due position of a distinguished clerical family.

Fortunately, perhaps unfortunately, the ladies thus confronted were trained to presence of mind. In the past twenty-four

hours Mrs. Harlay had gathered all attainable information touching Edenhurst affairs. She had digested her gleanings. So when with his light hair all a bristle, his light eyes gleaming, his thin lips set and drawn down, the rector was for passing Mademoiselle Gautier with the slightest bow, he was even ready to cut his nephew because of her companionship,—Mrs. Harlay, on the contrary, smiled affably, and by no means avoided greeting.

Sir Ernest, still under the impression of Rudolph Dene's words, and reckless of mood, took Alphonsine's hand in his, and stopping his uncle and Mrs. Harlay, he said,—

"I present to you my future wife, Mademoiselle Gautier."

"Chénevière rather," said the rector, throwing his head stiffly up and striding on indignant, for he too, knowing his nephew's needs, had judged him as Rudolph Dene had done.

But Mrs. Harlay, detaining Isolda, who would have followed her father, put her hand, indeed both hands, out for her be-

loved prodigal and his betrothed. She found suitable words of congratulation, but of course she ignored her ex-governess's claim to Edenhurst. The operation was skilfully and gracefully done, and it was a difficult one.

Always make the best of family mistakes was one of Mrs. Harlay's maxims; so without delay, the unruly importer of fever, the treacherous viper at her dearest Mrs. Eden's hearth, was set in her new place as the wife *in petto* of Sir Ernest, and if her claim held water, the future saviour of Harlay dignities. Mademoiselle Gautier responded well. It seemed to lookers-on the most natural thing in the world that she should be engaged to the lord of Harlay Abbot. But all the while Alphonsine gauged correctly the value of Mrs. Harlay's civility. She resented the direct disapproval of the rector and the downcast embarrassment of Isolda.

"Were you coming to the rectory?" asked Mrs. Harlay, when her husband, who had walked on, was out of hearing; "we will go back with you."

"What a comedy!" thought Mademoiselle Gautier, accepting the proposal. She did not want more *tête-à-tête* with Sir Ernest till he was calmer.

They had hardly reached the porch, however, when a servant from Edenhurst breathlessly overtook the party and gave Alphonsine a telegram and a letter.

"Mrs. Eden wished you to have them at once," he said; "she thought you might like them without delay."

Mademoiselle Gautier had gone through exhausting emotions in the last few days. When she had read the despatch her strength failed her. She was generally proof to all scenes, but now she sank on the nearest seat, so pale and undone, that will she nill she, Isolda must needs support her on one side lest she fall off the chair, while Ernest Harlay stood frowning at the other. Mrs. Harlay rushed for restoratives, but before she returned, Alphonsine had swooned unmistakeably. She was carried among them to the nearest sitting-room, where every contrivance for her benefit was fussily arranged by Mrs. Harlay.

So she was re-established with all the honours of war and all the satisfactions of peace at the rectory.

She had received news of her father's death, and so the one deep-seated affection of her life was broken. She had worked and hoped chiefly in reference to him. She had attempted the quest of Edenhurst, and borne for him all the humiliation of her enterprise. On his support and sympathy she relied in her future dealings with her mother, for whom her love and respect was small. When she recovered consciousness she felt bitterly how alone she was, more solitary than ever since her engagement to Sir Ernest, for he had a right to confidences she shrank from giving. What would he know of M. Chénevière's success in trade, his taste and talent, and at last, his unfortunate speculations. In all that there could be no sympathy for her. She let Sir Ernest read the telegram, but the letter from her mother, which might contain details of the end or near the end, she put away for a more convenient time.

CHAPTER XI.

In the meantime, Mr. Dene had told Mrs. Eden of the news he had received from Geneva. He had studied many women in his time, and he had found in her qualities that he had not before seen united. She could not but recognize his sincere friendliness, and the sense vaguely realized of his strength and honour and robust will was just then very restful to her, when she not less than Ernest Harlay was swimming for bare life among breakers. With Mr. Dene it was not impossible to discuss the fate of Francis Eden, and the chances by which his daughter's and grand-daughter's rights had been partly made clear.

"You don't think I ought to have disputed facts if they are likely to be proved true, do you?" she said.

"I think you have been more than right, if it is possible," said Mr. Dene, looking at her rather absently, "but I hate the girl."

Elizabeth took no notice of that; after a pause she said, "It's odd that Mr. Ravenscroft has deserted me. I imagine he is not pleased with the news I know he has had from Yorkshire."

"I saw him just now. He would not say what he had heard."

"So," said Mrs. Eden, with a long breath, "I must begin in earnest to settle about my future. I remember reading in some old novel that in cases like this the new comers can claim ever so many years' rent from the outgoing owner."

"That must be seen to for you of course, supposing the worst should be true."

"A little more or less, what great odds; I suppose I may take away my Guise things, my father's Indian silver for instance?"

Mrs. Eden was still in a half-somnambulist condition of health, brain and nerve controlling weakness at a severe expense to them. The light in her clear, grey eyes was very bright, and her cheeks, white as

the petals of a white rose, had feverish spots on them. She was more than usually handsome, but the languor and depression shown in every line of her thin hands, betrayed the unreality of her brilliant looks.

"I shall set up my tent, I think, in London," she said. "Life there will be all new to me, particularly in a 'two pair back;' I think I see the imitation marble paper on the passage walls, and smell the smells to be smelt in them. But there must be plenty of life in London. Not that I mean to look after shoe-blacks and hysterical dressmakers. The *detritus* of civilization increases too fast to try and shovel it away."

"And what interests do you mean to have?"

"Who knows? I will taste a little of everything, and then a great deal of what I like best.'

"All the fruits of the tree! May good digestion wait on appetite! I wish I might be your *officier de bouche* and cook them for you."

"That is the beauty of my being so utterly sent adrift. I shall be free to cook for myself every mess I choose, whether death be in the pot or not. I'm not under the laws and customs of 'the world' any more. If I can't do questionable good in my future poverty and isolation, I shall at least be safe from doing the harm that always goes with good. It's an emancipation. And I tell you fairly I mean to drop all old acquaintances; none of you shall see me in my new state. Perhaps I shall take to platforms and pulpits, or edit a magazine, or join the International, or become an ecstatica. You perceive I relish my freedom."

Mr. Dene did not smile as she expected. He saw how forced all this was. But at the best he could not have said any hopeful falsehoods in answer to her tirade. Before he had found anything helpful to say the footman sent in charge of Mademoiselle Gautier's telegram and letter came to report that he found her and she had sent no answer.

"There was none. She was in the village, I suppose?"

"No, ma'am; she was with Sir Ernest and Mrs. Harlay near the rectory."

Elizabeth was hard set to remain impassive, but she succeeded, saying, however, presently,—

"You are a friend of Sir Ernest Harlay's, Mr. Dene. Will you give him a message from me? Tell him I should like to see him as he is in the neighbourhood."

"Is that wise?" asked Mr. Dene; and Mrs. Eden knew that he understood her and her relations with Sir Ernest.

"I think so; I feel that I must see him. There are things I wish him to remember when—as I suppose probable—he will be master here."

"Look here, Mrs. Eden;" and Rudolph Dene's voice grew almost harsh in his earnest displeasure. "You are putting too great a strain on yourself, you must not ask anything of that fellow."

"Don't speak hardly of him. It was natural, prudent, my fault."

"Natural! That is your opinion of men.

But just now everything is unreal and fantastic to you. Be patient, forbearing with yourself, spare your strength for other things—future happiness. You are hasty in all your ideas, premature in your conclusions, and doubly so in your resolves."

"I must get through with it, and quickly if I can. Don't you understand I want to feel quite clear? But I must face what I ought to do."

"Women exaggerate their duties when they think of them at all. I can't conceive why you want to see Harlay; I saw him this morning. You know I used to be fond of him, but—it's better you should know the truth—I think he is mad or worse. He is fatally caught by this girl."

"I believe he likes her, and she will be his wife, as is very suitable, and all this is just why I want to see him," said Mrs. Eden gently, but with a very weary look.

Mr. Dene said nothing, so she went on:—

"I know it seems odd to you. You expect me to be angry, or hurt, or even

jealous; I don't think I have any of these feelings. I like Sir Ernest Harlay, I might say I love him, too well for that. I am somehow making a confessor of you, Mr. Dene, but there comes a time when one is sick of pretences. 'Aimer c'est tout comprendre,' you know. I think I understand him well enough to know that to see me again is good for him. It will save him some trouble, and when his happiness is secured, I shall like to know I had a hand in securing it."

"But you yourself. Is it good for you? Good heavens! how can you stoop to help him, even if you can help him?"

"One can only do what one thinks best. I mustn't think much about myself; besides, it helps me to do something. Of course what is good is good for every one; as for stooping, which of us is higher than his neighbour?"

"All well in theory, but can you stand the mean shortcomings of others. Is it well to be a forlorn hope? In a minority of one! The conflict is too one-sided. Don't try to be stronger and more unselfish

than every one else, and for a more than doubtful result. Think of it all. Nothing proved about these Lullins; nothing declared on Harlay's part. And what a weak idiot you would help; you will perhaps pin him to a course he may regret, if you assume him engaged to this adventuress. You rush into humiliation for the pleasure of it."

"Perhaps. But please see him for me before he leaves the place; ask him to come here for half an hour's conversation." With a slight smile she added, "Make him easy about my motives."

Mr. Dene with a growl which, being interpreted, meant that he should hold no long parley with his former friend, took up his hat, stared into it for a second or two, and then hastily left the room. Directly afterwards Mrs. Eden saw him walking fast towards the rectory.

"A gentleman and a friend," she thought, and unawares contrasted him with her late ideal of the inspired eyes, the enthusiast Ernest. Not an ideal now, yet she loved him still, though quite differently.

She was cut to the heart to know him her inferior. For the time she felt in a new world where new motives worked, new vistas of life opened, and the human figures she had known moved as phantoms.

Mr. Dene was always welcome at the rectory; but when he arrived there affairs did not wear their usually rose-coloured aspect. Mr. Harlay had returned in an angry temper to find his household more or less devoted to the "arrant impostor" Alphonsine, for he had made his mind up to have no other thought of her. When he heard of the news she had received from Geneva, he could not refuse her the harbourage her nerves required, but he shut himself up in his study, and resolutely turned his thoughts to consideration of the natural causes for the fall of the walls of Jericho, to study of the probable sandstone of which they were built, of the effect of sound on sandstone, and to research into cyclopian and other architecture as applied to fortifications. Mr. Dene interrupted his train of thought, but Mr. Dene was not to be refused entrance, though on this occa-

sion his business was not agreeable. He wished to be formal in his dealings with Sir Ernest, and that the rector should be a witness to them. Mr. Harlay objected, on Mrs. Eden's behalf, to his nephew's visiting under the circumstances, but Mr. Dene could manage men and women too with singular success. In a few words he showed Sir Ernest, who was sent for, his obligation to obey Mrs. Eden's request, whatever it might mean.

The men said not one superfluous word to each other. None of their tempers would have brooked the expression of an opinion. Ernest Harlay walked alone to Edenhurst. He passed the bay of thick-growing evergreens, where a month since he had worked himself up to beg the treasure of Elizabeth's love. How long ago! All was changed now, and he was drifting, he hardly knew whither, from his old anchorage. Old hopes and aspirations were dead or "swarmed like worms within his living clay."

Frowning and downcast he came into Mrs. Eden's drawing-room. He felt the

punishment of her mere presence, and for the life of him he could find no "word" to strengthen him just then. If he had not been a gentleman by habit and breeding, he could have broken out into angry remonstrance because she had brought him there.

She saw the deterioration, and she was sorry for him.

By instinct she had wished to see him, and she spoke to him now rather by instinct than by any special intention, for she was after all once more face to face with the man she had loved with the full powers of her imagination.

"Dear Sir Ernest, I could not let my last words to you be those of the other night. You are not angry that I asked you to come?"

"I am not angry," he said irritably, "though I wondered what the use of it was."

"The use may be clearer to us some day, when we can look back on the mistakes we have made, and our efforts to retrieve them."

He was silent; he did not understand what she wanted to say.

"You are going to marry Mademoiselle Gautier?"

"Yes."

"You know she will probably have this place and all the Eden property?"

"So I am told."

"If so, you need not sell Harlay Abbot?"

"You did not send for me to tell me this, for if you did—." He stopped, half-choked with passionate vexation that there should be such a sequence of probabilities.

"I only say these things, because I want you to know that I look at it all straight in the face. I want you, in days to come, to be sure that I was glad you saved your old estate. I do not say I am glad you marry Mademoiselle Gautier, that would be false. I want also to explain to you why I so little understood her words, or my position that evening."

"I want no explanations. I beg you to stop."

"But I must tell you, I shall always want to think you understood I had not

seen or known anything of the proofs to her rights then."

"I know nothing of them. I will know nothing of them."

"But that is weak and impossible besides. We must face our work, all of us. So that night I found that I had misjudged her in that at least, and I nearly yielded to the temptation of destroying those papers." Mrs. Eden became very white.

"Why will you tell me these things?"

"Am I so absolutely nothing to you that you do not care to know that I was saved from such a crime? I thought I might by it still bribe back your affection and help you as I used to plan."

"Why will you tell me?"

"God was good to me, I suppose, I like to tell you that. I cannot tell why I must once for all speak of this to you. But here are the papers. I wish you to keep them till the whole business is settled legally. It was better that as you did not really love me you should have been quite true to her. Don't speak. I know you would say kind things, but better not. I wanted

just to tell you all.—Next day—you can understand I was eager to do her right to the utmost in my power, and I am happier since. I should like to know you were happy too."

"My God! happy! no, not happy. That is gone."

He got up and strode to and fro in the room, and that his words were true was plainly written on his face.

"But you care for her?"

"Yes, yes, I care for her."

"Differently I know from your liking for me in the old times, long ago now," said Mrs. Eden, very gravely and sadly, for indeed her ideal soldier in the eternal conflict of light with darkness was strangely altered. And then, in words best not written here, the weak, sorely-troubled soul told her of the darkness that had fallen on him, or rather he did not tell her so much as speak aloud his trouble. He spoke of his spiritual shipwreck, of the sting of conscience that knew itself rebellious, and the impossibility of recourse to the old salves and stimulants for its cure.

His suffering was great. The veins were like cords under the skin of his damp forehead, for indeed he was entirely sincere, and to his temperament, trained as it was, reliance in almost visible Divine help and guidance was as necessary as are light and heat to a plant.

What could Elizabeth say? She felt painfully the shallowness of her *dilettante* scepticism in presence of this trouble. And she perceived that in it there was something that was not weakness, but rather strength—strength if not of endurance, of aspiration. The yearning for something afar, which, if it be a cause of dejection, is not less a spur to highest endeavour.

Her hopes and fears for his present happiness seemed impertinences when this sense of spiritual death was on him.

She respected him when she witnessed this agony of eclipsed belief, when burying his face in his hands his frame shook with emotion that had but remotely to do with any human love or loss. Yet an hour before he had been absorbed in reckless, pas-

sionate courtship of a woman who did not know the key-note of his deeper feelings.

Mrs. Eden's revival of the past, her kindly quiet words, the sense of her generous love, which he had betrayed, brought back on him in a flood his old thoughts and keen memories of his old "peace in believing."

But very soon Sir Ernest had pulled himself up, not happier, but very cold and quiet and courteous. And she grew cold and quiet and courteous too, for they must needs be far apart in all now.

She said some sentences to which he listened, with now and then a sign of assent or dissent. He showed and felt no particular interest to accept or decline certain commissions she gave him touching the future of Edenhurst and her charities there. He took as she wished the Morandi documents. For him seemed to have begun the long, uphill road by which through monotonous effort to do his duty a man may recover those satisfactions of faith which he so readily sacrifices in youth to some idol of the hour.

CHAPTER XII.

THERE followed a year and a half, during which Mrs. Eden served a weary apprenticeship to legal discussions and correspondences, chiefly official, concerning the disentanglement of her interests and the separation of her personal property from what was in due course ascertained to belong to the "Lullin annuitants," now represented by Madame Chénevière alone. Change of circumstances does not, as might be more convenient, entail change of habits and character. Mrs. Eden had steadily carried out her abdication, with all the justice she could attain. On the one hand she tempered Mr. Ravenscroft's combativeness, while she had not yielded on the other to weakness, or to her natural disgust at detailed inventories of her

rights, and catalogues of this and that Guise heirloom. She had found relief to strained feeling in doing as she conceived her honest duty. But when the last receipt was signed, the last agreement witnessed, an almost intolerable sense of abandonment and hopeless fatigue was on her. She drifted hither and thither indifferently; but after much uncertainty of home, and some attempts at life in hotels, English and continental, Mrs. Eden settled in a small house in London. By contrivance of investment Mr. Ravenscroft had ingeniously increased her income—shreds and tatters of the Guise property—from eight hundred to a thousand a year. She did not know how little that would be, even in Ebury Street, where she at last found a house, and it and its appointments were beyond her fortune. There was an undercurrent of recklessness that indeed affected all her arrangements. She had an abiding consciousness of the larger issues of human life, and this intruded itself in an unreasonable way when there was question of nicely calculating expenses, and leaving the

margin that respectability demands in such calculations. Her deeper thoughts, which would make themselves heard in the clatter of daily life, made discord of it, just as the strident *vox humana* of an organ might spoil the prettiness of musical-box airs, twittering in a different key.

She had not followed the furnishing taste which obtains in these days in the arrangement of her house. But there were enough Guise ornaments to give her drawing-room interest, and she had been particular about colour. She leant very much on Eastern taste, careful that it should not be Manchester in disguise. Of course her sitting-rooms witnessed to her chief likings and pursuits. Yet she could hardly have told what they were. Her mind and heart were alike jangled out of tune, and the medley of books and toys on her tables were representative. She had not entered into the joys of Chippendale and Chelsea china, the rapture of clawed furniture and old chintz. As for the coarse delights of velvet—why so often violet?—in books, of inch-deep stuffy

carpets, and heavy perfumes from forced flowers, she disliked all the accessories that vulgar women deem enchanting. Her brain was not susceptible to the spell of such hot-house atmosphere, in which her fine sense perceived a scent of death and decay. Life, "more life and fuller," as of old, she still longed for, though with a tired faith. Its miracles of noble action seemed to be as rare and as questionable as other modern miracles. Having so mistaken, indeed so often mistaken, galvanized imitations of true energy, her hopes were low. In Sir Ernest Harlay she had believed was some of the mysterious power which had, from time to time, vivified the Christian world, which could not surely be dead, as great Pan was dead. But Ernest had been weaker than the average weakness of nineteenth-century heroes, and had shown more clearly the faults than the merits of Puritan piety. She could never judge him, her love had put him out of court; but she knew that the light she looked for, and thought he carried, was nought. Perhaps less safe to

follow in our times than any other wandering star, whatever it may have been to the Ironsides.

It was about half-past five on Sunday afternoons that Mr. Dene was generally sure to find Mrs. Eden at home. This March day that he came into her drawing-room, a gleam of pale sunlight falling on her from between the arums in the western window hung around her, and scattered itself among the plaits of her brown hair in fine streaks of gold. In the shadow her face looked very colourless, but her grey eyes seemed springs of the same keen light caught somehow from a mirror opposite. She came with eager pleasure half across the room to greet her chief friend. He guessed the riddles of her life as no one, not even herself, could do. They had many thoughts and many scorns in common.

"Spring has come on us since you were here last, and this irrepressible sun, you see," she said, drawing down a blind.

"Somehow it asserts itself here more than in the country; accept the omen. Not a bud out in the hedges, and hunting in

full force. And so you are fairly settled here; no move for a whole calendar month, and beginning to strike root downwards."

"I don't know about the upward growth, though."

"And what particular fruit of the London tree have you been tasting? So! you have a bit of good work there," and Mr. Dene took up a water-colour sketch that lay on the table, not yet "mounted." "Brett, I see."

"He left it for me just now, but I said I wasn't visible to any one, for I want you to tell me heaps of news. I thought you would come."

"How a pair of irascible colonels had a row at their club, how A. B. is supposed to cheat at cards, how C. D. has married Lady Blarney, and all particulars are in *The World!* Why, I am only two hours in London, and expect you to entertain me with these choice legends."

"It's always the same things over and over again, with less and less wit to gild them. Have you been at Edenhurst?"

"I was there yesterday, by a chance."

"Well, go on."

"Do you wish true Truth, or polite Truth?"

"Are we strangers?"

"Well, Mrs. Eden, I am sorry for Harlay. It has come to that. Though I never meant to care what boiling water scalded him. Even Ravenscroft would be satisfied by the Edenhurst misery. I can't say serve him right. It is too complete a bankruptcy."

"How, is he not happy?"

"He might perhaps, after a fashion, if he only had his wife in authority over him. His pious sedatives might have pulled him through. But Madame Chénevière is crushing."

"And Madame Chénevière is the true Marquise de Carabas, isn't she?"

"I know better now what a battle Lady Harlay must have fought to get for you that haridan's release from all old claims. She is absolute mistress. It was a trait of light in Lady Harlay's character—natural enough in any one else; but let the truth be

spoken, she can't love you very much. The whole business has been a *fiasco* for her. Knowing nothing of English law she thought she should have some rights in Edenhurst, and it turns out she is quite dependent on her mother. Why she and that poor creature, Harlay, stuck to their engagement, I never guessed; but there are plenty of unaccountable things in this world of ours."

"Women could be fond of that 'poor creature,' as you call him," said Mrs. Eden; "that is one explanation, and he liked her very much, I know."

"Poor wretch! and Harlay Abbot is gone. He actually makes himself a sort of preaching agent to Mr. David Bromley, who is turning the old place inside out. The country is being improved out of its wits."

"I am glad Sir Ernest Harlay has work to do that he likes, for I suppose he and Mr. Bromley go hand in hand."

"It's presumptuous to have an opinion of one's own now-a-days, but I take it these revivalists of obsolete cant are

trying to bale out the ocean by bucketfuls. These Dissenters are on their religious side, the most unreal of our shams. They shout unreal protests against unreal enemies. Sincere attacks they don't stand for a moment. Radicalism and the quarrels of the Anglicans keep Dissent alive; but the religious element in it which rests on the Bible, and nothing but the Bible, will die out, not having a creed and a civil position to keep it together. Faith in capital and its uses is cutting up the old beliefs by the roots, and it's lost labour sticking the stalks again into gold-diggers' rubbish."

"Don't perorate," smiled Mrs. Eden, quoting Mr. Dene's own remonstrance when last she had held forth. "I'm glad, for his own sake, that he is doing something. But they live, I suppose, at Edenhurst?"

"After a fashion. Madame Chénevière weighs each feed of oats for the pair of horses they keep, and counts how many apples go to a pie. No servants stay a week in her service. Fortunately she is a

great deal in London, looking after mysterious business. Lady Harlay is pretty miserable, by her looks. Her mother doesn't let her call her soul her own, and torments her because the neighbours call on her, and not on Madame Chénevière. The old witch gives her a hundred or so now and then as pocket-money, with infinite haggling. Goodness knows what becomes of the rents. They are swallowed up in a London bank where Madame Chénevière has an account, and there is no more known. Old Waghorn, with tears in his eyes, opened his heart to me. He sent you his duty, by the way."

"Imagine my surprise," said Mrs. Eden. "I went into Halfmoon Chapel this morning, and Mr. Harlay preached. There was a crowd. I was told I should have to engage a sitting beforehand."

"Perhaps you could get stalls at Mitchell's."

"It will come to that, I daresay. There was a crush coming out, like the play; and, for that matter, the Harlay girls were gorgeous in Barbe-bleue bonnets, and

accessories, but why not? one must be of one's time."

"What was the sermon?"

"Exceedingly curious; about spirit-rapping and the angels. He told good stories of fairies, and was learned in folk-lore. I wonder whether St. Michael and Phœbus Apollo really belong to the same cycle of myths. I have no idea what that means, but that is what he said; and, somehow, one understood it when it came *ex cathedrâ*."

"That sort of thing will draw well; he will be appointed Chaplain to the Queen, directly. How do you manage about your dog? Isn't he a bore, in London?"

"It is he who is bored, dear beast. He generally goes with me for a walk in the morning, only he will engage hansoms when I don't want them. He wags his tail, and regularly stops them; jumps in and waits for me, which involves the expense of a shilling."

"Eigher, old dog," said Mr. Dene gravely, "you mustn't make your mistress remarkable."

Mrs. Eden shrugged her shoulders ever so little.

"Come and dine at half-past seven, Mr. Dene; I know how greedy you are. You won't have enough to eat, still—"

"I will try and bear a little hunger. Who will you have? You always have people on Sunday, haven't you?"

"M. Duval, of the Samaritan circles, and the Conde de Villaflor, and the Kerhuons."

"I wonder the Kerhuons like to meet that humbug Duval."

"What! M. Duval! the friend of humanity, the pet of Lord Stockbridge, the prophet of peace on earth, or, better still, the civilizer of war!"

"It appears we are to have a good deal of it. He will have to lay in a good stock of rose-water, but I hope you have not joined any of his Samaritan circles."

"No, but I might, you know; curiosity might take me to see a battle-field. You have told me that curiosity was my ruling passion."

"I wish it did not get you into acquaintance with shady foreigners."

"That is true masculine inconsistency; once upon a time you told me I should like them best; but the Kerhuons will supply respectability for the rest of us."

There was a slight defiance in Mrs. Eden's eyes.

"There are crevasses in that sort of society worse than any in the Mer de Glace."

"You are very good to like to lift me over them all; but I shall not tumble into them, nought is never in danger."

"Do you know Duval's antecedents; that he has ruined ever so many people?"

"That gives him a position, and then he means to save at least an equivalent number of lives by his Samaritans. We are to wear red circles as badges you know; no sectarian sign; we shall be crusaders without the cross. A circle means ever so much more than a cross. Lots of men now-a-days have a prejudice against a cross."

"And under M. Duval's leadership I should think lots of men would soon have a prejudice against the circle."

"Ah!" said Mrs. Eden, with a little

yawn "I daresay it is as good a work as any other. M. Duval may be an escaped convict for all it matters to me; all the more amusing perhaps. Mr. Ravenscroft will be here, and will keep us from breaking international law.

"Villaflor is an exile."

"Rather a feather in his Spanish cap. Eigher likes him, and I do. I am more educated than I was, you see, when we made acquaintance first."

"You are very different."

"Yes, very different, very."

There was a moment's silence, and Mr. Dene got up to go. "At half-past seven then; good-bye, Mrs. Eden."

He walked away from her door grave and ill-pleased. There was a deterioration in her that he did not like, and he could have wished her to be once again what she had been at Chamouni. The day they had spent together in the pass of the Tête Noire had remained a perpetual remembrance in his life, and had coloured it more than at the time he knew. It is curious how a step to the right hand or to the left can alter our

line of advance. Before he met Mrs. Eden he preferred beauty that was not seriously encumbered by brains. He could admire more than one type, and was by no means attached to any ideal, but there was something more than its beauty in Mrs. Eden's beautiful face, in the grace of her well-bred form. There was also something that showed more than intellect in her cultivation, something of power that was entirely feminine, yet not the less powerful in her calm and slightly disdainful judgment of things.

While her fascination had been latent there had been great charm to him in her unconscious reserve. She had when he first met her no notion of what she might be and do, but she had sufficiently attracted him to send him as a man of honour and principle away from her. Absence, tolerable sport and plenty of hardship in his journey across Russia, and by the Caspian Sea to Persia, had somewhat blurred her image in his mind. He returned to England indifferent enough for all the

purposes of pleasant acquaintanceship. He found her at the crisis of her life when she had played and lost in the hazard of her heart, and his admiration returned, but with a difference. It was more profound because there was in it less of egotism. He pitied her so that he exerted himself for her disentanglement, and did not trouble her with any suit of his own. He respected her pain, and discomfiture if he did not any longer idealize her. She was more now than a Luini, or even a Leonardo da Vinci. She had acquired in her disappointments some of the moral power and grace of sorrow, and the spiritual force which is the heritage of European women when at their best. He had seen a good deal of "grandes dames," and had begun to doubt all legends of very fair or very good women, except the histories of the saints in his calendar; but her generosity, her justice, her perfect truth and strength of purpose had been revelations to him. He had been a good friend to her in the annoyances of her disinheritance. He had helped

her to appease Mr. Ravenscroft, and to escape popular condolence, and she had learned to like his help, and lean on it. She consulted him about many things. He chose her Victoria, and bought her horse for her. Without any overt championship he checked gossip, and ensured for her respect, wherever his word had weight. He had not felt inclined to speak to her in any special way of his devotion to her. He seldom thought at all of marrying, and if he did the event seemed improbable for him. There is no doubt, but that Mrs. Eden kept other women out of his head, and influenced his life as it never before had been influenced. He cared for her so much and with so mixed a feeling that he did not recognize it as being "in love." In it there were complications of esteem and tender pity which he would have laughed at if another man had felt them. She was so thorough a woman, so alone and ingenuous for all her affectations of worldliness, that it was hard to say whether she should be most loved or respected.

To see her come down by ever such

trifling steps from her pedestal was vexing to Rudolf because he so thoroughly understood her. And as he recognized certain influences to be bad for her, he became more and more fastidious in his dislike of them. In her disappointment, and the weariness that beset her, Mrs. Eden had thrown herself into whatever could stir her tired heart. Refinement and brains had preserved her from the coarsenesses of life, and evil was as yet repugnant to her, even in its more agreeable forms. However, her dislike was rather instinctive than voluntary, and antipathies are not worth much in her position; Mr. Dene was uneasy lest some sudden contempt for herself should seize her, and that in mere disdain of society she might commit some social imprudence; become a member of M. Duval's circles, or be seen riding with the Conde de Villaflor, or— Mr. Dene looked savage enough as he thought of the range of follies possible to her, and of which she had no due fear.

He was punctual for dinner, but he found the Genevese Duval before him. A short, square man with whiskers, and hair cut

English fashion; over dressed, with diamond studs and wrist-buttons in an elaborate shirt. He was talking fast, and describing the horrors of the Sadowa battle-field which he had seen the day after the fight, but he was much quenched by Mr. Dene's entrance, for he was a rose-water brigand, and not one of your cool desperadoes. He had, nevertheless, done some desperate things during his financial career : when the Comte and Comtesse de Kerhuon were announced he cheered up. He liked to meet and enlist well-known persons in his benevolent bubble, and Madame de Kerhuon was a friend to many charities.

Nothing, however, could be cooler than their reception of his complex bow. However popular at St. James' Hall, and a lion at routs and drums, he could not stand the strain of intimate society. No amount of philanthropy could condone his defects in gesture, in eating and drinking, in the over-curl of his whiskers, and the embroidery of his shirt. Madame de Kerhuon listened with suavity to his schemes, but with the

fine tact which belongs to her society she detected the false notes in his benevolence.

Let it be confessed that Mrs. Eden was not possessed of sufficient balance. Her judgment was apt to be even consciously set aside when her enthusiasm was appealed to, though in its turn her enthusiasm was freely criticized by her wit. She was liable to the subtle "intoxication of the infinite," and it is as overmastering of the will and reason as any other intoxication.

Few tendencies are more dangerous than the tendency to travel out of the daily conditions of life, and to attempt the rapture of flying beyond the sound of the breakfast bell, and beyond the limitations of neighbourly opinion. Mrs. Eden was not free from the craving for other than "our daily bread," and she had taken kindly to cosmopolitan society. She was pleased with its elbow room, but it was satisfactory to Rudolph Dene to see that Madame de Kerhuon was really fond of her, for no one could better discourage cosmopolitan

vagaries. Her sincere piety did not hinder the slight irony which was useful in maintaining good sense.

M. de Kerhuon had not half her force or wit, but he was an excellent trained official, and a good barrier against M. de Villaflor's pretensions. No hidalgo airs could obtain more than their due appreciation in presence of M. de Kerhuon's faultless cravats and fishy eyes.

Mrs. Eden believed in her power to keep her five diverse guests in contentment. It was part of her optimistic intoxication that she thought she could do anything she willed to do, and this was consistent with too low an estimate of herself. She "sowed herself on every wind," and was confident of harvest chiefly because she did not care whether there were any or not. Her plans of life had been so thoroughly broken she hardly thought whether the fragments of them would hold water or not, but it was her temperament to be sanguine; her ideas were indolently entangled. No cause specially interested her; whether Bourbon legitimacy in M. de Villaflor, *faits accomplies*

in the Kerhuons, or sentimental humanitarianism in M. Duval.

She looked very well that evening. There was a mental and moral languor that softened the brilliancy of her perfect physical health.

She was dressed in black velvet, but there were abundant falls of Italian lace, which drooped in folds, and which might have been painted by Lely. Plaits of her brown hair crossed her head, and lace was twisted through them and fastened by diamond stars. Her hair was slightly lifted at the temples, and showed the line of her forehead which was singularly beautiful. For the modern type of English beauty her cheek-bones might have been over broad, though not high, and the lines of the cheeks curved in refined grace to the chin, which was by no means heavy, and rather dimpling than round. Mr. Dene had brought her a supply of white jasmine forced at Dene, and she wore two or three sprays of it in her dress, for it was not antipathetic to her nerves as it is to some.

Mrs. Eden's house was so well appointed

that no one thought about its appointments. Dinner was so well fitted to their needs that the persons met together in the little house in Ebury Street were at their best when it was nearly over. If any difficulties were discussed the solutions for them were easy. Life had more or less Utopian aspects by the time for dessert. The cook was French, the attendance and fruit English. The wines were of three nations, but happily not international, an epithet which means the muddling and not the making of good things.

Everything was far too well done for Mrs. Eden's means, but Mr. Dene and Mr. Ravenscroft, who knew her income, could not but admire and forgive. To Mr. Ravenscroft, conversation in French, which was spoken by the others, was like skating to a beginner in that art, but he resigned himself to miss some of the "stuff" that would surely be talked.

"I never shall understand you English," observed M. de Villaflor. "I have studied you, even written about you, and explained your Lord Mayor to my king and master,

but when it comes to your reverends, you are impossible."

"What is the puzzle to-day?" Mr. Dene asked.

"I have been in some of your temples for the Protestant cult; St. Paul's, of course; then a good policeman settled for me that I should like to hear a popular preacher of your confession."

"The Conde de Villaflor has been doing orthodox London!" said Mrs. Eden.

"Which is orthodox? I am no judge, but I seek information of your dissidents for my king, who wishes to be prepared for the throne he will infallibly occupy."

"You want to know how superior all is in Spain of course."

The Conde was long-winded, but he was accepted as such. Some people make themselves accepted, however obnoxious.

"I admire your Church as a rational cement for their society, but it produces strange eccentricities."

"Know, monsieur," said Mrs. Eden, with mock seriousness, "those are the workings of evolution, and differentiation, and

so report to your king, but what has struck you to-day?"

"I saw many cabs waiting at a door, and no carriages; so I guessed it was a function appropriate to your national Sabbath."

"Harlay's service in Half-Moon Street it is most likely," said Mr. Ravenscroft.

"There was a scene at the door, ladies fainting and crying. I went in and the crowd were all staring hard at the reverend. I understood him to say he could work miracles as well as the apostles. Which is possible, I do not wish to argue the point."

Madame de Kerhuon looked vexed and a little contemptuous, but said nothing.

"I can't think why people object to miracles. I never thought of Mr. Harlay as a new apostle, however," said Mrs. Eden, "he must have gone on with this morning's sermon on spirits. Did he make any one float in the air?"

"I assure you," said M. de Villaflor, "they were so excited and seemed to find me so strange an intruder that I came away."

"He told us very odd stories this morning," said Mrs. Eden; "I confess I like the Noah's ark of the toy-shop and the Book of Genesis better than the new legends."

"Are these not the Harlays who were at Rome when you were there?" asked Madame de Kerhuon.

"Yes, but the reverend you remember is very different. He had not then proved his armour. He has become a popular preacher."

"And the fair Mees? How well she rode!"

"Harlay?" said M. Duval, "we have heard that name in Geneva. A compatriot of mine married a Sir Harlay."

"Yes," said Mrs. Eden quietly. "Did you know the Chénevière family?"

"Slightly—very slightly. Excellent people, but unfortunate, I have heard, in business. At one time *richissime*, then at zero."

M. Duval covered some embarrassment by assuming a jaunty air. Mr. Dene had looked at him while he spoke, and not very pleasantly.

"I heard this afternoon," said Mrs. Eden, "that they have taken a house in Eaton Square, close by."

"Like her impudence," muttered Mr. Ravenscroft, but so that his hostess could not hear. Mrs. Eden liked to air her *sang froid* and indifference. With a sort of disdain that was not however visible, she began to sketch for Madame de Kerhuon what she called the romance of Edenhurst. Finding her so fluent and even witty in her story, Mr. Ravenscroft addressed comments on it in the vulgar tongue and a low voice to Rudolf Dene, who sat next him.

"The place is going to ruin. There have been several strikes among the servants, who are being dismissed every two or three days. The mother is a termagant. I am told she has quarrelled with two firms of lawyers."

Here it was evident that no one would eat or drink more, and Mrs. Eden rose. M. de Kerhuon gave her his arm, and the party returned to the drawing-room as they came. After coffee M. Duval described his Samaritan scheme, and invited questions

which no one wished to put. M. de Villaflor bore for some minutes courteously a panegyric on the peace of the future, that was to be founded by the international circles for ambulance reform. But he too had his plan for setting society straight, which it was his duty to air. The evening threatened to be detestable until Mrs. Eden struck the unfailing vein of vanity. M. de Villaflor was invited to sing, and Spanish songs are as good to hear as they are rarely heard. M. Duval was supplied with pencil and paper to illustrate his adventures at Sadowa, and to show the plan of his model knapsack, in which every soldier should carry his own case of surgical instruments. By an ingenious adaptation they were convertible into a cooking apparatus, which should be provided with a tin of antelope powder.

"Why antelope powder?" asked Mr. Dene.

"As might be expected, chemical science has traced to their ultimate forms the molecules that go to form muscle. They abound in this powder, and a vast increase in activity may be confidently looked for

in those who feed on it. It is calculated that ten thousand men, supplied with an ounce a day of it, will easily hold double their number in check by their superior rapidity of evolution. That, as modern strategists allow, is the secret of success in the future."

"Our hunting men might like it as jumping powder," said Mr. Ravenscroft, with mild wit.

"Ah, monsieur! you jest at wounds who never felt a scar in your England."

"Where will you get your antelopes?" asked Mr. Dene.

"In North Africa, that immense and trackless home of the most muscular animals, which inhale the desert breezes."

"I see you know Algeria."

"It was my country for years, my mother sleeps there."

"Ah—."

"Ravenscroft," said Mr. Dene, as they walked towards Pall Mall together, for it was a fine night, "there is some bubble company under M. Duval's philanthropy. Look after Mrs. Eden."

"She would hardly thank me if I did, out of my office. When she wishes a thing done, why she does it, as you saw at Edenhurst."

"I suppose you have quite done with that estate, you have nothing more to say to the present people?"

"Nothing for several reasons, and among them, that Madame Chénevière is playing very odd pranks; she is a gambler on a large scale. Her husband came to grief on the Vienna Exchange. She practised on a small scale at Geneva, and here she is absolute owner of Edenhurst. It's not in human nature for her to be quiet. I happened to hear of a large operation of hers in Russian securities the other day, to the tune of several thousands in differences alone."

"But old Waghorn told me she was so stingy that life at Edenhurst had become simply impracticable for the others."

"That is a part of it. Have you seen her? Yes, of course; we saw her together when you witnessed her deed releasing the back rents."

"I can't conceive how Lady Harlay got that concession from her. I suppose she

was a little dazed by the sudden luck, and most likely she had some remaining doubt whether it was really hers. They never properly understood their position. Lady Harlay couldn't comprehend that by English law she had no rights, and was dependent on her mother. Sir Ernest was like a stunned man all through the business. It's bad enough to deal with truly pious parsons, but truly pious laymen are quite beyond reckoning. No, I certainly have broken off all connexion with them with infinite pleasure. I saw Lady Harlay in the train the other day, she has lost her looks a good deal. Temper shows more in her face. She is not fit to hold a candle to Mrs. Eden."

Mr. Dene said nothing, they were near his club, and he bid good-night to Mr. Ravenscroft rather abruptly. He was always impatient of hearing Mrs. Eden bracketed with any other woman.

END OF VOL. II.

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